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The Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment was established in 1989 by the governments of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts to foster cooperative actions within the Gulf watershed. Its mission is to maintain and enhance environmental quality in the Gulf of Maine to allow for sustainable resource use by existing and future generations.

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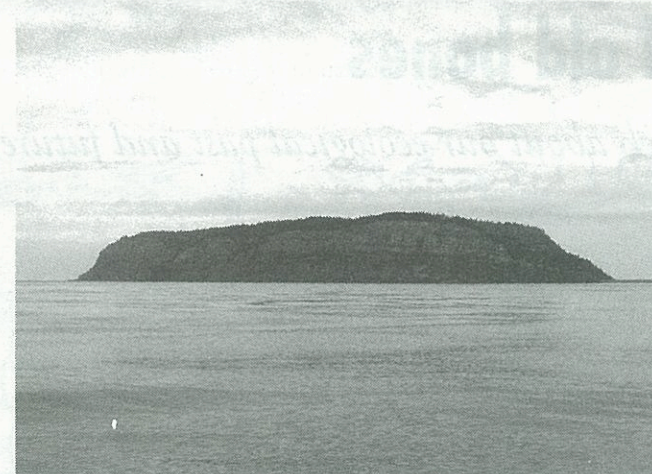
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Editor's Notes

In the International Year of Ecotourism, one island's story

It is clear and calm in the pale blue morning as we circumnavigate Isle Haute, Nova Scotia, an island off Cape Chignecto in the Upper Bay of Fundy. Leaning up against the sides of the retired fishing boat, several field naturalists, binoculars fixed on the towering basalt cliffs, call out the names of seabirds clustered upon the ledges and craggy coves. There are gannets, black guillimonts, shearwaters, and perhaps a peregrine falcon soaring high above the island. The bird scoops its wings full of cool air, then disappears beyond a line of



Isle Haute appears destined for federal protection.

trees. A pod of grey seals, necks stretched like steel cranes, watch curiously as our boat nears the shore.

In 1604, Samuel de Champlain came upon the island while looking for a place to settle his crew. He too noted the "high cliffs surrounded by great rocks," and "a pond of salt water, which lies at the base of a gravel point having the form of a spur."

We disembark on that same gravel beach near the pond. With us is Dan Conlin, the curator of marine history at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax and Isle Haute historian, who has volunteered to lead a hike and tells us the island's story. Our group includes a retired university history professor, a wildflower expert and a marine biologist. We will spend the next five hours in wonder of this place, rarely inhabited, but more and more threatened.

Unlike Champlain, we find the beach littered with soda cans, snack wrappers

and a mix of debris including a plastic pig. Recent visitors have left a fire smoldering. To get an idea of the increase of visitors, Conlin opens a covered container he left the year before with a journal inside. He notes the surprising number of entries from visitors as far away as Japan.

In 1997, Conlin was part of an expedition sponsored by the Nova Scotia Museum that spent a week here recording the island's natural history. The Isle Haute survey caught the eye of Kevin Davidson, the head of endangered species and habitat conservation in the Atlantic region for Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS). Davidson recognized that Isle Haute's wildlife, archaeology and rare plants made it eligible as a national wildlife area. He has spent the past five years discussing the management of the island with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Isle Haute's present owner.

When Conlin tells the field naturalists about the probability of the island receiving federal protection, there is a collective sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness, it won't become a basalt mine," says one birder. "Or some rich person's fantasy island," remarks another.

Davidson works out of an office in Sackville, New Brunswick, nearby some of the largest protected areas in the Bay of Fundy. Back on the mainland, I phone him to ask how he plans to manage the island. "In all honesty I still don't know

how I'm going to do it," he tells me. "But if I didn't try I'd be remiss in my responsibilities to the Canadian public."

Davidson's responsibilities encompass a region that spans southern New Brunswick to the Arctic Circle. To say he is understaffed is an understatement.

"I've got 14 migratory bird sanctuaries, 11 wildlife areas and one guy to take care of them," he says.

That's 14,400 hectares or 35,500 acres. Environment Canada owns 3,300 hectares [8,151 acres] in the Bay of Fundy alone. Isle Haute would add 83 more hectares [205 acres].

Despite it all, Davidson is sanguine. "That may seem abysmal, but we've had minimal damage to the environmental integrity of our wildlife areas." The way the Canada Wildlife Act is written, he explains, protection is not 100 percent guaranteed, but it is more easily achieved than through other federal or provincial legislation. "Unlike national parks where a range of activities are permitted at the outset," he continues, "as our starting point in wildlife areas absolutely nothing is allowed. And then you permit things. If our sign doesn't say you can do it, you can't do it."

Still, the boom of tourist operations over the past decade that transport people to Fundy's migratory bird areas has Davidson worried. He views the trend, "as the biggest single threat to our protected areas."



Mary DesRoches and her sons operate a low-impact tourist business in the Bay of Fundy. Photos: Andi Rierden

He adds, "When this started ten years ago the average person running an ecotourism venture tended to be granola bar types, close to the earth, interested environmentalists, people just making a living. Now we've got constant pressure from tourism departments and ecotourism businesses, which view our protected areas as, in their own words, 'underdeveloped products.' It makes my hair stand."

Nevertheless, Davidson says, with the proper regulations and community support all parties should be able to strike a balance. "It's a fine line between allowing people to see these wonderful gems and allowing them to destroy what they came to see," he says.

Davidson envisions a plan for Isle Haute similar to the one in place on Machias Seal Island, which is also managed by the Canadian government.

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