

A seasoned environmental group considers the issue asks and what's fair

Q & A with Mark Butler, Ecology Action Centre

By Andi Rierden, Editor

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) in Halifax, Nova Scotia evolved from a college course in 1971 designed to convince local residents to recycle their trash and to provide the public with environmental information. Thirty-one years later, the nonprofit environmental organization has taken on a range of issues from hazardous waste disposal to wilderness preservation.

In recent years, the Centre has organized Gulf-wide workshops on salt marsh restoration and the impact of invasive species contained in ballast water. In 2000, it hosted the first international symposium on deep-sea corals, attended by 120 scientists, environmentalists, government representatives, fishers and citizens from 20 countries.

As part of a current campaign, the Centre is urging the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) to create a policy that recognizes some gear types cause more damage than others. The Centre filed papers last year seeking a judicial review of DFO's decision to open Georges Bank to groundfish draggers.

In June, DFO closed most of a 424-square-kilometer [170 square mile] portion of Georges Bank to all bottom-dragging fishing gear, including gillnets to save ancient, deep-sea corals. Because their gear is less harmful to corals, long-line fishermen are allowed to fish in ten percent of the restricted area. The closure will allow scientists to study the impact of fishing on 35 coral species. They will probe waters 400

meters [1,320 feet] deep in the outer edges of the closed area, which could be expanded or tightened depending on research results.

In a recent interview, Mark Butler, a former deck hand on commercial fishing boats and head of the EAC's Marine Issues Committee, talked about the need to assess gear types, the recent closure and some of the financial and social challenges faced by environmental groups in Atlantic Canada. The following are some excerpts from that conversation.



Mark Butler

Photo: Andi Rierden

What's the premise behind your campaign on gear types?

This is not an issue that arose yesterday. Fishermen have long been concerned and warned of the consequences of dragging heavy gear over the bottom. If you went to any wharf in Atlantic

Canada in the last 30 years, people will tell you, even people in the dragger industry, that that type of gear does a lot of damage to the ocean floor.

The [federal] Fisheries Act says thou shall not destroy fish habitat, and it's quite clear that fish habitat is anything a fish uses in its life cycle. The act has been applied to freshwater habitat. If you're going to damage salmon or trout habitat you have to go through a regulatory process or you have to make efforts to minimize that damage or restore fish habitat elsewhere. But when it comes to the ocean floor, we have tended to ignore damage done. In most people's mind the ocean is dark, deep and obscure. But with advances in underwater video, side-scan sonars and multi-beam bathymetry, we have a better understanding of the ocean floor and realize there is a lot of life there and it needs protecting.

What are you hoping to accomplish?

We're seeking some change in the way fishing is done everywhere. The way it is now, all gear types are treated the same—a hand liner with six hooks over the side is excluded from an area in the same way that a 90-foot dragger is. Yet the reason there's this growing concern is because of the damage done, in particular, by industrialized forms of fishing. To make people who have done the least amount of damage pay for the sins of all is unfair. DFO should assess the impact of gear types and identify which does the least amount of damage. Then let's favor

that type of gear. We don't want to shut down fishing; we just want to see it done right.

What about designating more marine protected areas?

We haven't put marine protected areas at the forefront of our campaign. Yes, they have their place, but they are far from what's needed if we want a healthy ecosystem and a healthy fishery. If we protect 10 or 20 percent of the oceans, that leaves 80 percent unprotected. To protect corals, for example, we have to know where they are—and we don't know where they are. So closing areas to protect corals has its limits. If we said instead, for instance, that if you're fishing for cod, haddock, pollock [groundfish] you have to use a hook and not a drag, we would protect corals even if we don't know where they are.

Do you think EAC had an impact in the recent closure on Georges Bank?

Yes, I think we've had an impact along with a lot of other groups like the Canadian Ocean Society and the bottom long-line fishermen in that region. We're glad to see the corals protected. It's a good step and recognition that the ocean floor is important. However, it was traditionally a long-lining area. As I understand it, the bottom draggers couldn't fish there because of the bathymetry [terrain]. So in a way, the people who do the least damage to the ocean floor, the long-liners, are going to be the ones most affected by this closure.

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Sending positive ripples through the lives of teens

By Theresa Torrent-Ellis

Last year, a nonprofit youth development organization called Rippleffect raised the funding necessary to purchase the 26-acre Cow Island in Casco Bay, with assistance from the Maine Coast Heritage Trust. Tom Regan, who founded the Rippleffect in 1998, said

his goal was to give coastal education opportunities to a broad range of youngsters, particularly those at risk. He envisioned an outdoor classroom, or ocean academy, to help teens build self-confidence and make sound decisions through wilderness adventures.

Earlier this summer, Rippleffect offered 16 teens a week on Cow Island to learn sea-kayaking skills and island geology,

swim and hike. Rippleffect and the Parkside Community Policing Project in Portland sponsored the program. Using kayaks as educational tools and Casco Bay as a classroom, the week-long adventure marked one of the highlights of the opening season of Rippleffect's Cow Island Ocean Academy.

Officers from the community-policing project also volunteered to work with the participants. In addition to learning kayaking and other recreational skills, the teens studied tidepools and worked with local lobstermen.

For Regan, the start-up of the youth programs is the fulfillment of a long-time dream. In 1999, he led a 2,700-mile kayaking expedition to pay homage to the lives of several young people he knew who had died of AIDS and to educate teens about the disease. The team set out from Lubec, Maine and completed the journey in Key West, Florida. Along the way, the kayakers spoke to 2,300 youths about the importance of taking acceptable versus unacceptable risks in their daily lives. Having lost friends to AIDS, Regan used the metaphor of the risks inherent in kayaking to the risks teens face from AIDS.

"All youth are at risk—some more at risk—and these kids face serious conse-

quences resulting from inappropriate, poorly advised choices," Regan told me.

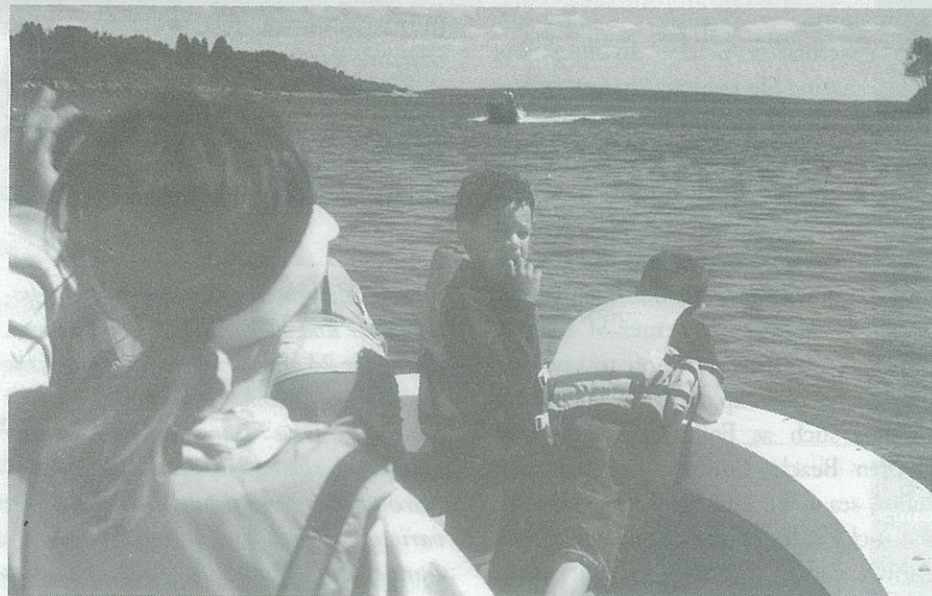
After completing their journey, Regan and expedition team member Aaron Frederick, inspired by their youth contacts, brought Rippleffect back to Maine. "It was bittersweet, the experience of making contact with these kids, introducing them to kayaking and then having to leave. We needed something that would continue and to create an affordable and accessible opportunity."

Regan added that developing the program in Maine was his way of giving back to the community where he was raised and honoring his friends who died of AIDS, in particular, a childhood friend who had helped him through troubled times and inspired his love for Casco Bay.

"Having grown up in Cape Elizabeth without means, I was fortunate to have friends who introduced me to the Bay," Regan said.

Future plans for the Cow Island Ocean Academy include an arts center, theater, classrooms (both indoor and outdoor) and summer office space. For more information go to www.rippleffect.net.

Theresa Torrent-Ellis is the outreach coordinator for the Maine Coastal Program, Maine State Planning Office.



Youngsters from Portland cruised out to Cow Island, Maine this summer for a week of kayaking and wilderness education.

Photo: Theresa Torrent-Ellis