

Tree hugger power

The NDP is off to a great start on land conservation. Let's hope they keep listening to environmentalists.

by [Chris Benjamin](#) , The Coast, October 15, 2009

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At the Nova Scotia Environment Network's annual gathering last week, in a discussion on working with the new government, some expressed hope, but most were disappointed. Longtime NDP MLA and environmentalist Howard Epstein was passed over for a cabinet post, and there has been no progress on key NDP issues, like a permanent uranium mining ban and improved renewable energy policies.

The attending environmentalists were, however, thrilled about the \$70 million increase in the provincial land acquisition budget, and that 14,700 hectares of Eastern Shore land has been protected as the Ship Harbour–Long Lake Wilderness Area.

According to Kermit deGooyer, the Ecology Action Centre's wilderness and public land conservation planner, the finalization of the new wilderness area is "a significant first step for this government in protecting land and keeping the commitment of the previous government."

That last government committed to protect 12 percent of Nova Scotia's land from development. Minister of Natural Resources John MacDonnell tells me he hopes the \$70 million will bring the province "as close to 12 percent as we can get. We're considering five land offerings from the private sector."

Until then, the largest new protected land in over a decade is reason to celebrate, and it brings the province's percentage of protected land to 8.7 percent. Ship Harbour–Long Lake was brought together through work of churches, 200 local businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, schools, the local Musquodoboit community, large corporations, activists and politicians from each end of the spectrum.

"Scientists tell us that biodiversity thrives in the absence of human disturbance," deGooyer explains of the area's importance. "Large continuous areas where wildlife can be undisturbed by people are rare."

The area also hosts a population of mainland moose. There are only about a thousand of them left, making them as unusual as the large road–free woods they need to live. To illustrate how rare roadlessness is in this province, deGooyer calculated that all our roads end to end could circumvent the equator more than twice.

For more than 40 years the Ship Harbour–Long Lake land was leased to forestry companies, first to Scott Paper, which sold its rights to Kimberly Clarke, which transferred them to Neenah Paper. And yet the area somehow stayed virtually free of logging roads. "It was just a matter of time before it was logged," deGooyer says. "In '01 Kimberly Clarke submitted a harvesting plan to the province that involved clear–cutting and logging roads."

But while citizens and activists were ignored by a Conservative government hostile to new protected areas, the logging companies listened. "They knew to log it with so much opposition would be a headache," deGooyer says. After years of conversations, Neenah backed out of its licence. Finally the province relented and agreed to a protected area, pending a year–long extensive public consultation.

The public was overwhelmingly in favour of protecting the land, which connects two other Wilderness Areas (White Lake and Tangier Grand Lake) to create 35,000 hectares of nearly continuous protected land. That's essentially a wilderness corridor nearly as big as Keji, with three times as many lakes, that connects to the ocean. There is nothing else like it in Nova Scotia.

An interesting footnote to this textbook example of environmental success is that, back in the '70s, the federal government wanted to make the same area a national park. "It was felt that the park was being imposed on the community," deGooyer explains. "The government backed away from it in the early '70s."

Now, that area has been protected only because the community demanded it.

"It was bottom-up," deGooyer says. "It started when the locals got worried about logging."

People are fickle that way. We don't like to be told what to do, even if it's good for us. We'd rather figure it out for ourselves. Government's job is to shut up and listen.

Let's hope the new government learns something for this tale. They've done well to seal the deal on this protected area, and even sweetened the pot with another \$70 million for land acquisitions. Minister MacDonnell tells me he's heard nothing but positive feedback on the new investment in public lands. "Nobody's saying we wish you had done that other thing," he says.

But my experience at the NSEN gathering tells me environmentalists are losing patience on a number of other issues they also expected the NDP to act swiftly on. Many of these folks are lifelong party faithful. The lesson is this: now that you're in power, your job is to do what the voters tell you.