

Community-Led Planning for the Future of Gros Morne

by **REBECCA BRUSHETT** and **LAURA KARAHKA** /// EAC Staff

Hiker overlooking Bonne Bay u-shaped fjords and surrounding communities of Gros Morne, Newfoundland and Labrador.

The area in and around Gros Morne National Park, and its neighboring coastal communities, is one of the most amazing spots in Atlantic Canada to explore pristine rivers, glacially carved fjords, bays and harbours teeming with marine life.

Since 2020, the EAC has been working with communities in the Gros Morne region to create a community-led marine spatial plan that identifies best-fit areas for commercial fishing, tourism and recreation, and potential areas for increased marine protection. Healthy marine ecosystems are critical for many things that are important to the local community, including healthy fisheries and businesses, clean waters for leisure and life, biodiversity and the blue economy. When designed properly and centred on community needs, marine protected areas are one of the best tools available to safeguard marine species and habitats.

Why the Gros Morne region? With a national park already protecting the land, protecting the connected coastal and marine environments could be a great next step. Establishing areas for marine protection in this region would create one of the only “land and sea” protected sites in eastern Canada. With this in mind our remote EAC team members, Rebecca Brushett and Brittney Garcia, are working with the people of the Gros Morne region to better understand what is happening now and what is important to them for the future.

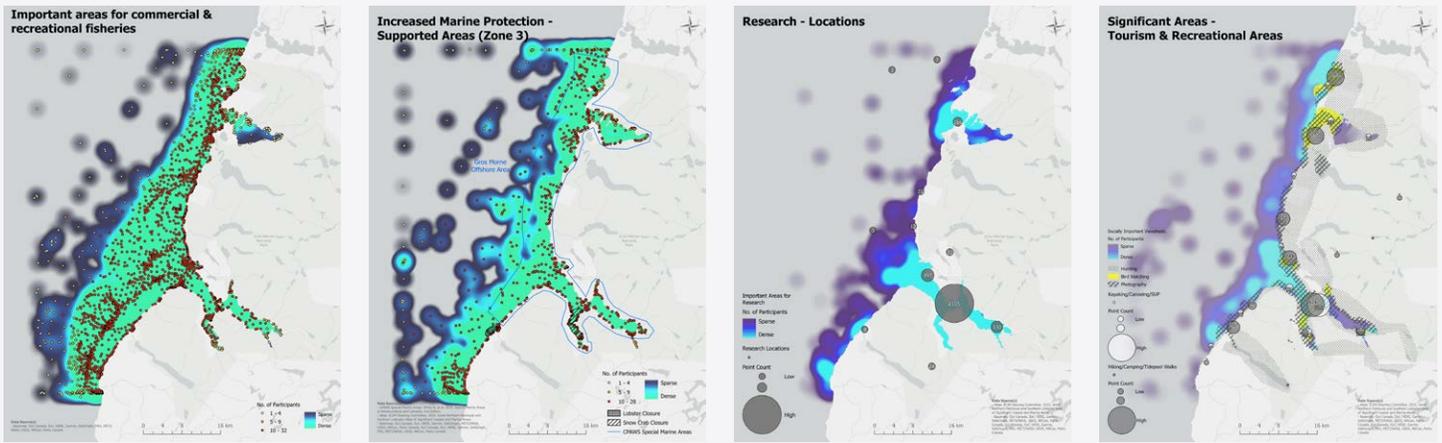
“I started this project as my thesis focus in 2015 during my Master of Arts in Environmental Policy degree when industry was hoping to frack in one of the small rural communities of Gros Morne,”



Rebecca connects with local community members at one of many engagement sessions. PHOTOS: Tom Cochrane

shares Rebecca, who lives in nearby Norris Point. “I realized a marine spatial plan had to be created that included the region’s voice, along with scientific experts, to identify best-fit areas for supported future economic development, but also important areas for increased marine protection. Without this, our coastal communities and sensitive marine environments would continue to be vulnerable to outside interests with a very different agenda for the future of this region.”

The Gros Morne project involves working with many communities and stakeholders to gather information on marine values and uses throughout the region. We are working actively with the Qalipu First Nation, municipal governments, fish harvesters, local NGOs, academic institutions, tourism operators and others to gather input and develop the marine spatial plan together.



These four maps visually display areas that community members have identified as significant to fisheries, tourism, and research, as well as those where they were in support of potential increased marine protection.

Thus far, we have engaged with more than 200 community stakeholders. The people of Gros Morne have contributed their thoughts through surveys and mapping exercises to help identify important marine areas and uses. Results from surveys gave us incredible insight into what people support in relation to future sustainable economic development. We also found that more than 80% of local folks are either in favour of marine protection for the Gros Morne region or would like to learn more.

Survey responses also helped us understand how the local community prioritizes different developments that might be influenced by potential marine protection. More than 85% were in favour of further eco-tourism development in the area, 58% in favour of shellfish aquaculture development, and only 24% in support of potential finfish aquaculture development.

With a deeper understanding of the community's values thanks to community engagement, we hope to empower the community in the management of their own local waters going forward. We now better understand key areas for folks like inshore fish harvesters and local tourism operators, as well as habitats that need increased conservation measures to ensure marine biodiversity and coastal communities in this region are looked after for generations to come.

What's next? Later in 2023 we will share the full results of our community consultations in an atlas-style marine plan. Our work with a Geographic Information System specialist will help us build interactive maps based on research on the local marine environment (some from as early as the 1960s!) and input from community engagement. The resulting community-led marine spatial plan will highlight the values of the people of Gros Morne and can be used to inform future plans, projects and government decisions that will impact the area.

As Marine Planning and Engagement Coordinator with EAC, **Rebecca** (she/her) works with communities in the Gros Morne region to ensure sensitive marine ecosystems are protected and our marine resources are used responsibly.

Laura (she/her) supports the various projects and campaigns of EAC's Marine Team as Communications and Administration Officer.

By coming together with the people of Gros Morne, we are showcasing the connections coastal communities have to the ocean, and the potential for community-led plans to support sustainable coastal futures. With more than 90% of our survey respondents interested in continuing to be informed and consulted about this work, we are confident that community involvement will continue to strengthen these efforts and create a well-rounded plan and sustainable future for Gros Morne.

Our work in partnership with the **Atlantic Healthy Oceans Initiative (AHOI)**, a non-profit in Gros Morne, is also essential to this project. With AHOI's research-grade underwater remote operated vehicle (ROV), we are able to build on historical research from the Bonne Bay Aquarium and Research Station and collect exciting new baseline information on the health of our ocean in Gros Morne.

The ROV can dive up to 300 metres deep while collecting high-definition photos and video footage. Information gathered on these dives will feed into the community-led marine spatial plan, helping us identify areas in need of enhanced marine conservation.



AHOI's ROV which will be used to gather baseline data of marine habitat and species in the Gros Morne region. PHOTO: Atlantic Healthy Oceans Initiative (AHOI)