Protesters at the Coastal Protection Act Rally in downtown Halifax in May 2024.
PHOTO: Nicolas Winkler Photography

Toward a Common Coastal Future

by **NICOLAS WINKLER** /// EAC Staff

Nova Scotia - Canada's Ocean Playground is printed boldly on our licence plates. However, cracks in this narrative emerge once you look closer at how our coastline is managed.

A staggering 86 per cent of Nova Scotia's 13,000 kilometres of coastline is privately owned. Nova Scotia has an estimated 58,000 properties with coastal frontage, meaning that out of more than a million inhabitants, less than six per cent of our population owns a vastly disproportionate amount of our coastline. With that exclusivity comes unbalanced control over what happens in coastal spaces or who gets to access the shore.

With some 70 per cent of Nova Scotians living within 20 kilometres of the coast, what happens there affects us all. When the current provincial government walked away from the long-anticipated Coastal Protection Act earlier this year, not only did it join a 50+ year legacy of failed coastal management in Nova Scotia, it also reversed years of hard-earned progress. The decision will have long-lasting effects on all Nova Scotians.

A complicated place

Nova Scotia's iconic coastline hosts habitats that are crucial to our resilience to the harsh marine environment. Estuaries, wetlands, pine barrens, salt marshes and nearshore eelgrass meadows are vital for healthy coastlines. The ecological integrity of these ecosystems protects our shores from erosion and storms, filters water and supports the food chains on which our fisheries depend.

People are drawn to the coast for its diverse landscapes and ever-changing beauty. We seek its calm shores to recharge our energies and experience awe at the power of the sea when storms come ashore. Being on the coast is one of those quintessential human experiences that defies description and defines why many of us live here. On the coast we find identity, culture and inspiration.

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The coast is a dynamic place. It represents a transitional space between land and sea dominated by natural forces where change is the only true constant. In the Anthropocene, we must also be content to balance our desire to be on the coast with the threat of sea level rise, coastal flooding, erosion and more frequent and severe impacts due to climate change.

The coast is a complicated place. Through colonial law and conquest, our modern society has divided it through the introduction of private property ownership and imposed multiple layers of complex government jurisdiction informed by and inherited from our colonial histories. Today, the coastal zone is simultaneously everyone's problem but no one's responsibility.

The coast is also a contested place. It is on the limited lands available on the coast that we see the social and political inequalities of society laid bare for all to see. It is also here that hubris meets the unrelenting, uncontrollable pressure of the ocean, with bolder developments arrogantly building ever closer to a rising sea.

Forging new relationships

It is in this dynamic, complicated and contested place that we must forge new ways to live with the coast in the face of existing climate realities – but also with each other. We can draw lessons from the artificial seawalls that feature throughout our province as they are an apt symbol for these relationships.

These costly structures made of large granite boulders offer, at best, only temporary protection from the forces of the sea – easily overtopped in extreme storms while saddling their owners and governments with a permanent need for upkeep. They require carbon intensive processes of quarrying, transportation and engineering to build, ironically contributing to the very forces owners hope to protect themselves from. They damage and fragment critical coastal ecosystems on which we all depend. Seawalls also perpetuate the power imbalance over the coast at the cost of others. They act to deflect and transfer wave energy, increasing the erosion risk of unprotected adjacent shorelines, whether these are neighbors or what little public coastal space we have access to.

Our relationships can also be understood through the cost of irresponsible coastal development and lack of holistic coastal planning. The predicted increased risks to our coastal communities due to climate change will come at cost to all Nova Scotians, not just those fortunate or wealthy enough to live on the coast. We will all share in the increased insurance premiums required for some of us to live on a more dangerous coast, or the cost of clean-up and assistance to coastal owners when disaster strikes. That is all before we account for the cost of shared infrastructure like roads and waterfronts.

In our decision-making, often missing from our coastal discourses are the voices of Indigenous peoples and African Nova Scotians and others that have been historically marginalized from desirable coastal lands. Re-examining our relationship with the coast is an opportunity to recognize and address historical wrongs while working to prevent new climate injustices.

A common coastal future

Five decades of failed coastal management in Nova Scotia has taught us that we cannot rely on the whims of those who govern based on short term cyclical election politics to make sensible, long-term decisions about our coastline. Ineffectual and costly ad-hoc coastal management duplicated across our municipalities will only further perpetuate this very notion.

We must therefore seek to boldly reimagine how we manage and govern these spaces, in which the shared values for a common coastal future are rooted in community dialogue, equity and justice.

We must acknowledge the existential challenges that climate change poses to our place on the coast, recognizing, in the face of the climate crisis, we may need to give way to nature before we are forced to do so.

In turn, it means we must redefine our relationship with the coast, one that sheds the extractive, utilitarian narrative for one that centres and respects the critical and vital ecologies of the coast and, importantly, accepts our place in its ever-changing nature.

Now is the time for a coastal ethic that forges a healthier, inclusive relationship with one another – one that acknowledges our history – if we are to successfully forge a common coastal future.

The foundation of former mayor of Halifax, Peter Kelly, at Eagle Head in Queens on a stretch of sand between the ocean and a wetland.
PHOTO: Nicolas Winkler Photography