

Bonne Bay and Gros Morne National Park.
PHOTO: Tom Cochrane

Connecting with Communities:

CREATING THE GROS MORNE COMMUNITY-LED MARINE ATLAS IN WESTERN NEWFOUNDLAND

by **BRITNEY GARCIA** /// EAC Staff

Situated on the unceded, traditional territory of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq, the Gros Morne region today is home to just over 3,000 people within seven enclave communities, as well as Gros Morne National Park which welcomes up to 200,000 visitors annually. This region spans over 1,800 square kilometres of

brehtaking pristine fjords, mountain ranges, old-growth boreal forests, wetlands and coastal ecosystems, and it is now recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The unique fjords found within this region reach a maximum depth of 230 metres in Bonne Bay and are home to many rare species including soft Arctic corals, Bonne Bay Acadian Redfish, American eel, wolffish and more. A long history of fishing and deep family ties to the inshore fishery remains present today, with lobster, snow crab, mackerel, halibut and many others making up most catches today.

Brittney (she/her) loves the ocean and being outside. She holds a B.Sc. and a master of environmental science and has been working with the EAC's marine team for two years in marine planning and management. She loves to travel and immerse herself in different cultures. She enjoys diving, hiking and reading in her free time.

Creating the atlas

The Gros Morne Community-led Marine Atlas (the atlas) was first brought to life through Memorial University of Newfoundland

TAKE ACTION

Stay tuned for the full release of the printed atlas to learn ways your community can work together with decision makers to conduct effective community engagement sessions and collect baseline research to create your community-led marine plan.

research that was done by Rebecca Brushett, marine protection and planning coordinator with the Ecology Action Centre (EAC). This research began in 2015 to map the social and ecological values that people attach to marine areas surrounding Gros Morne. This research was then expanded in 2020 with the EAC's Marine Team and Rebecca leading the way.

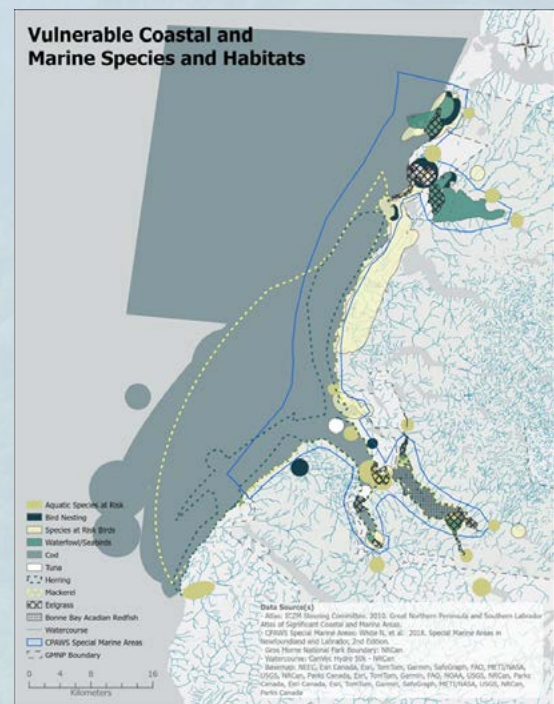
We drew on several existing marine planning initiatives, such as the Marine Plan Partnership for the North Pacific Coast (MaPP) for guidance and inspiration in the development of the Atlas and methodology. We merged learnings from projects like MaPP with the EAC's expertise in community engagement, protection and planning, marine policy, data analytics and geographic information systems. This foundation enabled us to gather, interpret and ultimately map input from community participants and long-term biological and social science research which started in the late 1960s.

This process included multiple phases to build relationships with participants and to better understand and refine the places and activities most important to community members. We connected with over 400 people including local fish harvesters, academic experts, Indigenous First Nations, town councils, business operators and other local stakeholders. Along with the EAC's mapping and survey workshops, we also organized and digitized over 50 years of biological and social science research conducted in Gros Morne and housed at Memorial University of Newfoundland's Bonne Bay Aquarium and Research Station, creating an inventory with over 400 published and unpublished reports on ocean ecosystem and local cultural values tied to the marine environment.

Cumulatively the final maps showcase areas where sensitive marine habitats and species exist, areas most important to the small-scale fisheries and eco-tourism sector and areas to monitor and protect against future impacts from aquatic invasive species and anthropogenic activities.

Collaborating on ocean management

The co-management of marine space is a practice that is often talked about in academic circles, but rarely put into action in meaningful ways. As our ocean continues to change, and competing industries look to expand the blue economy, it's more critical than ever for the community's voice to be heard. The atlas is a tool that does just that. It offers a holistic view of the ecosystem and captures the cultural and economic significance of these waters. It does this through combining traditional ecological knowledge on important fish stocks from fish harvesters, completed research and gaps to fill by marine experts, the most important areas for the thriving



Vulnerable and keystone marine species and habitats found in the Gros Morne region. It showcases aquatic species at risk, birds species at risk, cod, tuna, herring, mackerel, eelgrass, and bonne bay Acadian redfish. The light blue inland features are the various waterways present within the park.

MAP: Kayi Chan



EAC 2020 community engagement session with local fish harvesters in Rocky Harbour, NL.
PHOTO: Rebecca Brushett

tourism industry and key themes and activities the region supports or opposes now and into the future.

One of the key features of the atlas is its focus on sustainable livelihood opportunities. By identifying areas where conservation and economic activities can coexist, the atlas provides a roadmap for balancing environmental protection with the needs of local communities.

The atlas serves as both a valuable tool for policymakers and stakeholders as it reinforces the idea that effective conservation is deeply rooted in local knowledge and community engagement. Through this project, we are paving the way for a future where the conservation of marine biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods go hand-in-hand.

The atlas also serves as a model for other regions looking to develop similar tools. The process to create the atlas with the people of Gros Morne is itself something to celebrate as it demonstrates how we can capture all stakeholders' values and expertise in a way that is balanced and open to all who live, work and play in this area. Involving the region from the beginning has shown that mapping these activities and capturing their values will provide a more holistic tool that all levels of government can use to make more informed decisions. If used correctly, the atlas can help to prevent projects or activities that may impact vulnerable coastal or marine environments if not granted social licence by the community.

The atlas will continue to play a vital role in guiding the management of Gros Morne's coastal and marine ecosystem and benefiting the community by having an ocean plan that was created by the people of the region. It will remain a living document, being updated as new research and engagement with the region is done – protecting the long-term values of the region and our changing ocean.



Lobster in eelgrass meadow.
PHOTO: Nick Hawkins