

Development Grief Intersects With Environmental Hope

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Sandy Lake Regional Park.
PHOTO: Kortney Dunsby

The urban core of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) is uniquely situated close to many ecologically significant green spaces. Interacting with these areas is a way for communities to channel fear and grief for our environment into hope and action. Access to communal green spaces allows people to see and feel the changes that are happening around us. The **Halifax Green Network Plan** provides an opportunity to protect the ecological integrity of these spaces as they face threats of development, but is real progress being made to protect these crucial natural environments?

Channeling climate grief into action

How do we cope with the weight of the climate and biodiversity crises?

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The simple answer is, we don't – not all the time. We all succumb on occasion, when it feels as though our world may be falling apart in front of us. But we learn to feel the waves of emotions. Interacting with the natural world while experiencing fear and grief over what we are losing can lead to transformative action and resilience, turning environmental grief into environmental hope.

“To have active hope is not to be an escapist. Rather, it's a mindful response to grief and anger, a realization we can choose to shape the future we want.” – Erin Hitchcock, the Green Gazette.

Our communities deserve access to green spaces that are facing the threats of climate change and development. Recreation activities in nature – as well as simply spending time outside together – provides a sense of community that helps turn fear into fight. Knowing that others are just as scared and passionate about making real change provides an opportunity for activists to work together.

These green spaces are more than the intersection of grief and hope – they hold many tangible benefits:

- Offering free public recreational opportunities for residents of urban areas, helping with physical health and well-being

- Providing habitats for many species
- Protecting ecological functions, such as acting as carbon sinks, which contributes to climate change adaptation
- Directing growth into existing urban areas, which promotes more affordable and sustainable settlement patterns; and
- Retaining lands for industrial uses like agriculture and sustainable forestry.

Halifax Green Network Plan

The urban core of the HRM is close to many ecologically significant green spaces – namely Sandy Lake in Bedford, the Blue Mountain–Birch Cove Lakes and the Backlands. These and other important areas make up the Halifax Green Network Plan, which outlines and advocates for best practices for establishing our urban green spaces as a "greenbelt." A greenbelt is a network of natural, undeveloped and agricultural/forestry lands surrounding an urban area. It highlights the intersection of environmental, economic, social and cultural value in multi-use land planning and management.

The plan was adopted by the Halifax Regional Council in 2018 with 79 actions to support its goals and objectives with themes of ecology, working landscapes, community shaping, outdoor recreation and cultural landscapes. The **most recent updates from 2022** highlight the progress being made to promote sustainability, preserve important land and aquatic systems, provide education on ecosystem functions and develop strategies to manage these spaces. Despite this progress, ecologically significant areas are still facing intense threats from development.

Sandy Lake threatened by development

Sandy Lake Regional Park encompasses 1,000 acres of land that is already designated for protection. An expansion of the park to include another 1,800 acres as the Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park was proposed based on several municipal planning processes. There have been ongoing efforts to preserve this surrounding area of green space for many years.

The area is home to 15 species-at-risk and has several significant freshwater bodies and sections of old growth within its forests. This area provides significant ecological services, such as filtration and runoff mitigation as part of the Sackville watershed.

Research and activities facilitated by community organizations such as the **Sandy Lake - Sackville River Regional Park Coalition**, **Sandy Lake Conservation Association**, and **Dr. David Patriquin (Sandy Lake & Environs)** demonstrate Sandy Lake's ecological significance. However, as time goes on, research is showing that water quality is declining and the vital species supported by this environment are facing extreme risks due to developmental pressure.

TAKE ACTION

Write to your MLA about Sandy Lake! Tell them why this space is meaningful to you and that you want to see it protected from rushed, unsustainable development.

The **proposed development** would remove over 660 acres of forested lands to the west of Sandy Lake to build a housing development. HRM residents recognize that we need more housing, but at what cost to our environment? Species-rich habitats should not pay the price. And will this lakeside development truly help our need for accessible, affordable housing?

The ecological significance of these lands should be enough of a reason to expand the park borders. Sandy Lake and the surrounding area is a habitat for numerous bird species and offers habitat connectivity for wildlife. When paired with the social and cultural value to the public, it's clear this area deserves protection.

We often hear the "bad news" stories first when it comes to the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss, while the progress being made towards adaptation is buried beneath the headlines. Sandy Lake, and the community organizations working to protect it and other green spaces, could be a positive story in the fight to protect our climate and environment. And in these efforts, we can find a way to channel grief into action and hope.



Valentines crafted with love for Sandy Lake by community members in February 2025.

PHOTO: Karen McKendry