

The Government is Letting Nature Down.

COMMUNITIES ARE STEPPING UP.

by **LINDSAY LEE** /// EAC Staff

Despite strong public support (and its own legislation), the Houston government is neglecting the province's **legal commitments** to protect at least 20 per cent of Nova Scotia's lands and waters by 2030. In the absence of government leadership, a growing number of people are coming together to protect wild spaces in the communities they call home.

Nature can't wait

Nature is disappearing at an unprecedented rate, with **species going extinct 1,000 times faster now than in pre-human times**. Protected areas are the cornerstone of a healthy environment, but the government's progress in Nova Scotia has been glacial. At the time of writing, the government hasn't added any new protected areas since December 2023. Clearly, the traditional top-down approach isn't working.

Local insights, lasting impact

Community-proposed protected areas are different; they're driven by local knowledge, connection and creativity, not politics.

This local knowledge includes a strong understanding of a site's ecological benefits, often observed or documented over many years. These insights can help fill important information gaps or even disprove government and industry assertions.

Citizen science is a newer activism tool, but it's expanding rapidly, says Rob Bright of **Citizen Science Nova Scotia**. Documenting species at risk or stands of old growth forest empowers people who care about nature to make a real difference, "thereby protecting different species at risk and the habitats they need to survive."

Concerned citizens set up Last Hope Camp near **Beals Brook** in 2021, after local residents objected to a forestry company cutting a site important to wildlife. The Department of Natural Resources **said they had reviewed the site twice** and found no species at risk, but citizen scientists documented 15 occurrences of species at risk lichens. The mandatory buffers around those lichens put 60 per cent of the site off-limits to forestry and bolstered the case for legal protection. The volunteers camped at the site for 203 days in order to protect it while they compiled this data.

Buying back the Mersey

The 2012 grassroots "Buy Back the Mersey" campaign spurred the provincial government to **purchase over 28,000 acres of land** from the insolvent Bowater Mersey forestry company. While there's still much work to do, this offered unprecedented opportunities for conservation and resulted in numerous new protected areas.

One outstanding former Bowater Mersey site that remains unprotected is the **proposed Ingram River Wilderness Area**. The St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association has been championing the area for over 10 years, documenting a staggering **17 species at risk and an additional 72 species of conservation concern**.

Local advocacy garnered support from 50 organizations, including the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia.

Together, they secured legal protection for 25 per cent of the site (as **Island Lake Wilderness Area**). Now, they need public support to save the rest of the site — including the **oldest known forest in the Maritimes** — from being cut.

Community, creativity and conservation

The Save Our Old Forests Association (SOOF) is campaigning for important sites, including the proposed **Goldsmith Lake Wilderness Area**.

The group's motto is "Do what you love doing to help save old forests." This approach has inspired "musicians, artists, bakers, crafters, dancers and so many more to bring their talents and passions forward to help save old forests," explained Rob Bright.

TAKE ACTION

Interested in joining an existing campaign in your community, but don't know where to start? Email Lindsay at lindsay.lee@ecologyaction.ca.

No matter where you live in the province, you can help by contacting your MLA. Let them know that you are counting on them to support more protected areas in Nova Scotia and engage meaningfully with communities.



The Proposed Goldsmith Lake Wilderness Area.
PHOTO: Nina Newington



Activists gather in the proposed Chain Lakes Wilderness Area.
PHOTO: Blomidon Naturalists Society

Community-building events included their free Soup Sundays, which served up over 230 bowls of soup this winter (not including extra helpings).

"We hear again and again at our SOOF Soup Sundays how much it helps to be in a room together, eating, talking, learning, laughing," added Nina Newington, President of SOOF. "It's all about loving the forest and all the beings that depend on it, including us humans."

Caring for the planet (and each other)

The Blomidon Naturalists Society (BNS) is advocating for the **proposed Chain Lakes Wilderness Area** in Kings County to be protected. BNS member Celes Davar sees this people-powered approach to protecting ecosystems as a crucial way "governments, non-profit organizations and citizens can collectively invest in and help to protect habitats, sequester carbon and protect biodiversity."

"Stewardship of place transcends political inaction, giving citizens real pathways to protecting habitats," said Celes. He believes that community action also helps "care for community — something Nova Scotians are well-known for."

"Many of us feel helpless as our governments fail to act," said Nina Newington. "Working together to achieve a common goal that will make a difference really helps. While the focus is on the particular area you are trying to protect, in the end, it's about how we all need to work together to protect this Earth that is our only home."

Nature in the crosshairs

Like much of the province, proposed protected areas in Nova Scotia are still being targeted for resource extraction, including **clearcutting** and a **quarry**.

Community-proposed protected areas aren't a guarantee that the land will be saved, but they are part of a new movement that helps put conservation in the hands of everyday people — and there's no telling what kind of ripple effects that could have.

Ordinary people, extraordinary impact

These are just a few of the worthy sites that communities have put forward to the provincial government for protection. Across Nova Scotia, local artists, musicians, citizen scientists and small business owners could be the difference between these areas being saved or destroyed.

The future of our province (and our planet) is too important to leave solely in the hands of politicians. We all have a role to play in protecting nature in our communities and our province. From old-growth forests to thriving wetlands, many of the wild features that we love today exist because someone had the foresight and courage to protect them.

The pressures from government and industry are real, but Nova Scotians have managed to save special places from these threats before.

Together, we can do it again.

Lindsay (she/her) is the wilderness community outreach officer at the EAC. She's best known through grassroots campaigns to save Owls Head Provincial Park and West Mabou Beach Provincial Park.