

Critical Green Space in HRM: SANDY LAKE AND BLUE MOUNTAIN - BIRCH COVE LAKES

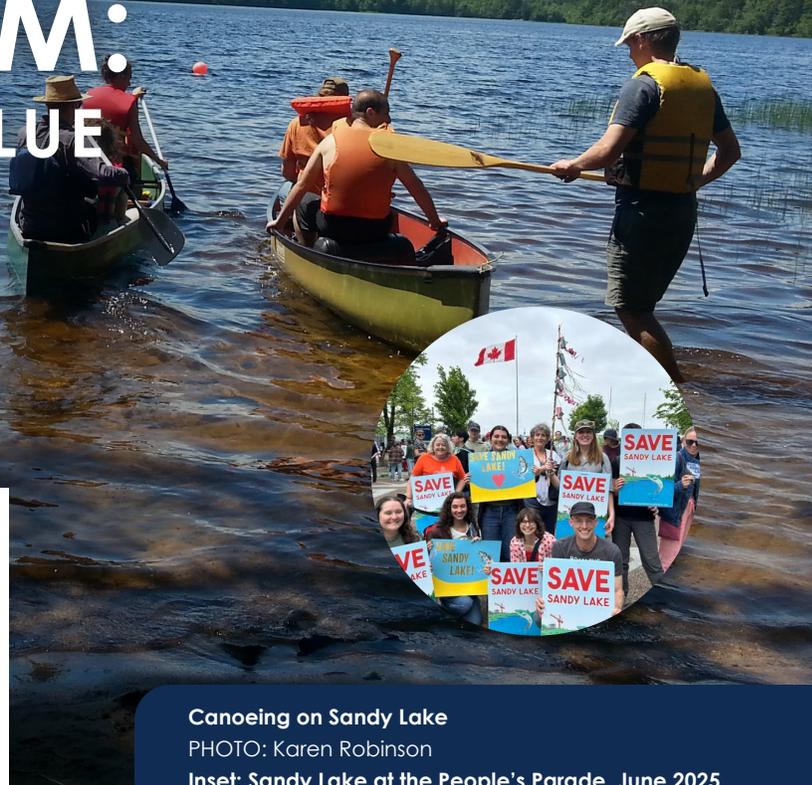
by **KENDRA MAINPRIZE** /// EAC Volunteer

Sandy Lake Park and Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) are green spaces within the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), whose forests and wetlands offer respite from the urban centres nearby. These areas provide essential ecosystem services, support biodiversity and offer outdoor recreation opportunities. The existence of these parks is a testimony to the work of grassroots movements that have been advocating to protect these lands from development for decades; however, the fight is not over yet.

HRM's Sandy Lake Park currently consists of 1,100 acres of lakes and forests at the head of the Bedford Basin. While the park is conserved, surrounding lands within the watershed (Sackville River and tributaries) are not. The Sandy Lake - Sackville River Regional Park Coalition calls for the addition of 1,700 acres of this surrounding area to be acquired for the park. Studies have shown developing these lands would mean the loss of mature pockets of Wabanaki (Acadian) forests, declines in water quality and the loss of connected habitats for diverse species (including 15 species at risk). The fight to expand park boundaries has faced many setbacks; already, 300 acres of proposed park land were clear-cut by a developer in 2013.

Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) is another park within the Halifax Regional Municipality, home to an incredible amount of wildlife, including at least 23 species at risk. Right now, 1,782 hectares are included in the Wilderness Area. The Friends of BMBCL Society has been working to support the creation of the BMBCL National Urban Park (NUP). The creation of the National Urban Park would expand the park boundary to include wildlife habitat and surrounding waterways to better protect the area's ecosystem function. Mary Ann McGrath, Chair of Friends of BMBCL, emphasized that this unique NUP would become a focal point of the community and bring lasting benefits for generations to come.

Kendra (she/her) is a recent graduate from marine biology at Dalhousie University with a love for teaching, tidepools and science communication.



Canoeing on Sandy Lake

PHOTO: Karen Robinson

Inset: Sandy Lake at the People's Parade, June 2025

Both coalitions are at critical moments in the fight to save these lands. Areas within both conceptual park boundaries have been designated by the province as Special Planning Areas (SPAs) – sites where sprawling urban developments are proposed to be fast-tracked in the HRM. While the municipality is responsible for conducting studies on the SPAs, the province has the final call. Many feel democracy and transparency have been eroded; there are fewer opportunities for public input and final decisions are being made behind closed doors.

While the affordable housing crisis is a major concern, new developments should serve those that need them most. Both SPAs are expensive and challenging landscapes to develop, and prices of the housing units will likely reflect this. Additionally, both proposed developments are outside of the municipal Urban Service Boundary; costs of extending services and infrastructure as well as the continued dependence on cars will further reduce affordability.

Both Sandy Lake and Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes have been shaped through a long history of community advocacy, and the fight continues against developments encroaching on the conceptual park boundaries. No final decision has been made about the fate of the SPAs. The Sandy Lake and BMBCL regions are already serving us in so many ways – as said by Karen McKendry, EAC's senior wilderness outreach coordinator and Sandy Lake Coalition member, "Just because you could develop there, doesn't mean you should." These grassroots movements implore us to consider what we are losing with the development of these lands and to make our voices heard in the fight for their protection.