

RETHINKING COASTAL AUTHORITY IN NOVA SCOTIA: We all share the coast—so let's share its governance

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Introduction



Coast and coastal trails near Kingsburg, Lunenburg County. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024).*

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People are drawn to the coast for many reasons: natural beauty, livelihood, access to resources, trade, recreation, travel, safety, etc. Attraction to the coast has shaped settlement patterns across the world, with many communities, societies, and traditions now deeply rooted around shorelines. Consequently, coasts have become more than natural space—they are legal, cultural,

and political arenas as well. They are places where multiple interests meet, where different values collide, and where critical decisions about access and exclusion are made.

Nova Scotia is no exception. Here, no one lives far from the sea. Roughly 70% of the province's population resides in coastal communities, and even more visit the coast regularly¹. Whether through walks on the beach, surfing, swimming, recreational and/or commercial fishing, cultural and traditional practices, or simply breathing in the ocean air, the coast holds meaning for a wide diversity of stakeholders. For some, it is a workplace; for others, a place of spiritual connection; for many, a site of leisure and community.

Coastal access is a multifaceted term, encompassing horizontal access (along the coastline), vertical access (inland to the coast), the quality of people's access to the beach, access to coastal resources, and participation in coastal decision-making^{2,3,4}.

Regardless of how coastal access is defined, the central issue it underscores remains the same: making coastal access equitable.



Fence along coastal property and trail, Chebucto Head. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024).*

But the coast is also a space of growing conflict. Across Nova Scotia, there is a long standing history of tensions between public and private access, between economic development and environmental protection, and between the authority of governments and the rights and claims of communities and Indigenous Nations. Amid the failure to address these tensions, coastal access has become more restricted by legal ambiguity and privatization; inequities in who gets to enjoy (or control) the coast often reflect deeper, systemic disparities shaped by race, class, and colonial history—for example, the systemic disenfranchisement of African Nova Scotian's from coastal spaces such as Africville. As climate change transforms coastal regions, those least responsible for the emissions and pollution accelerating it are often the most vulnerable to its impacts.

This three part blog series explores these complexities present along Nova Scotia's coast by asking three important questions—questions that every coastal resident or user should consider:

What is it that each of us values about the coast? Who should be responsible for coastal governance? And, what role can each of us play in shaping its future?

Coastal governance in Canada has historically been shaped by settler colonial institutions. As authors Warrior, Fanning and Metaxas write, this means that coastal management processes have followed a “top-down governance approach where decision-making authority, responsibility, and power are retained by the Canadian federal government.”⁵

Problematically, federal, provincial, and municipal governments in Canada operate within a legacy of discrimination. In Nova Scotia, this particularly includes discrimination against African Nova Scotians and Indigenous peoples—two communities with strong historical and livelihood ties to the coast.

Coastal landowners, users, community groups, and governments all have stakes in the management of the coastline—and each bring their own contrasting economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives.

Authority over coastal areas can be a complex arena given the diversity of coastal stakeholders. In Nova Scotia, the existing coastal authority has failed to produce solutions to the various conflicts arising in coastal areas, sometimes to the exclusion of alternative, local visions for coastal management. This has called into question who should really be responsible for coastal governance, and which alternative governance models might be viable in Nova Scotia. Should it be the federal, provincial, and municipal governments? Should coastal policy-making be top-down, or should it foreground local communities and stakeholders voices? And, in a province which is officially and recognizably located on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq people, how do we ensure Indigenous peoples have a meaningful role in such coastal conversations?

Across the next parts of this series, we’ll explore some of the ways in which individuals and communities, near and far, have been involved in the decisions shaping their coasts—and how we might think about reshaping coastal authority altogether in the future.

If the coast is truly valuable to us all (and it is!) then each of us will have a role to play moving forward.

Part I: Coastal stakeholders, values, and perspectives



Seawall being constructed at Little Crescent Beach, La Have region, Lunenburg County. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024).*

Although the coast is a common space for people in Nova Scotia, its meaning is far from universal. The way individuals, communities, and institutions understand and use coastal areas is shaped by a range of social, economic, political, and cultural valuesⁱ. And because these perspectives often pull in different directions, conflicts between coastal stakeholders are inherently present.

For Mi'kmaq and other Indigenous Nations, the coast can hold spiritual and cultural meanings that don't map neatly onto settler categories of property, productivity, or conservation. By contrast, a real estate developer might understand the coast primarily as a commodity defined by the market value of land. A fisher may see it as a productive space tied to livelihood and sustenance. A landowner might view it through property rights or privacy, asserting control over who has the right to be there. Meanwhile, environmental organizations often frame the coast as an ecological space in need of protectionⁱⁱ.

The prevailing definition of the coast among governance systems around the world today center the line of contact between the dry land and the sea. But this is a uniquely colonial perspective which fragments coastal management and erases more holistic understandings of coastal space.

Many Indigenous peoples—from Cree and Inuit in Québec, to the Torres Strait Islanders—view coastal land, sea, and ice as part of spatially continuous, interconnected wholes³. Recognizing this perspective challenges us to rethink our very definition of the coast, opening our minds to different understandings of what is a widely shared space.

Importantly, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Individuals may draw on multiple values simultaneously, and different groups may align or conflict depending on the context. A common example is how Indigenous Nations balance both customary fishing rights with stewardship ethics that prioritize ecosystem health^{iv}.



Private Beach Signage at Bachman's Beach. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024).*

What matters is not just the values themselves, but how they intersect—and often collide—in shared spaces. When landowners restrict beach access in the name of privacy, it may conflict with local traditions of communal use^v. When coastal development prioritizes economic returns, it may undermine conservation goals^{vi}. These tensions reveal that the coast is a site of complexity, of contested meaning.

Recognizing that a degree of conflict is inherent to these tensions, the question is not whether conflicts will arise, but how they are managed—and who gets a say in that process.

In the next parts of this series, we turn from the multiple coastal meanings and values to the systems that govern it. How are these conflicts managed, and what are the limitations of existing governance frameworks? By examining Nova Scotia's current coastal governance framework, we can begin to see why many of today's tensions persist—and why alternative approaches may be needed.

Part II: Why Coastal Governance Keeps Failing Us



Aerial photo of coastal community and coastal infrastructure, La Have region, Lunenburg County. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2025).*

Coastal commodification: the process of turning coastal lands and waters into private property or economic assets, often rooted in colonial settlement patterns that displaced [Mi'kmaq](#) and [African Nova Scotian communities](#) from coastal areas.

Coastal governance framework: the collection of systems and processes involved in the management of coastal areas and activities, including the associated policy- and/or decision-making processes.

Nova Scotia, similarly to much of the contemporary world, is facing a crisis of overlapping conflicts along the coast. While stemming from tensions between coastal stakeholders, these conflicts—namely, coastal access, privatization, inequity, and climate change—are symptomatic of the historical colonial commodification of Nova Scotia's coast, as well as of the existing coastal governance framework.

In particular, the coastal governance framework has three defining, settler colonial characteristics that have consistently undermined its capacity for inclusive and effective governance: it is state-led (or top-down), fragmented, and ineffective in integrating multiple knowledge systems.

State-led governance

Coastal governance in Nova Scotia is predominantly state-led, meaning that authority is concentrated within the government (federal, provincial, and municipal). While this may appear straightforward, it is particularly concerning for a couple of reasons. First, while the Canadian government legally recognizes other governance systems—namely those of Indigenous Nations, such as the Mi'kmaq people, via official treaty agreements—the state-centric nature of coastal governance means these are rarely considered in practiceⁱ. This exclusion perpetuates the marginalization of Indigenous nations within settler-colonial systems and infringes upon the rights of Mi'kmaq communities.

Second, the top-down approach of state-led governance often results in the reinforcement of existing power dynamics with regards to who gets to express their interests in coastal spaces. As two independent research studies have revealed, despite tokenistic efforts to engage the public to date, local stakeholders in Nova Scotia still don't have any real influence on decision-making^{ii,iii}. Meaningful participation, by contrast, would involve local stakeholders throughout each phase of the decision-making process... But, more on this later!

Fragmented governance

The *Coastal Protection Act*, which was passed by the Government of Nova Scotia in 2019, would have seen the establishment of a province-wide Coastal Protection Zone within which there would be clear legislation for public and private usage and developments. The Act was abandoned in 2024, replaced instead by *The Coastal Protection Action Plan*. This plan is not a formal piece of legislation, but rather a general outline for the province to support municipalities with their continued management of the coast. [Read more here.](#)

The second issue with Nova Scotia's coastal governance system is that it is fragmented and de-centralised; Nova Scotia has no legally-binding coastal policy through which they can enforce decisions across different regions or levels of government. Instead, municipalities are left to manage their respective coastlines independently, often with limited resources, jurisdiction, or clarity. This fragmented approach makes it nearly impossible to align coastal management with broader provincial or national objectives, especially when it comes to balancing economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives.

Another related challenge is legal pluralism: the coexistence of multiple, overlapping legal systems within a single geographical and/or jurisdictional area^{iv}. The coast is a unique space where municipal, provincial, federal, Indigenous, land-based, marine-based, and international

laws all apply in one way or another. The result is that the coast is everyone's problem and no one's responsibility. And when this is the case, significant tensions can be created.

For example, conflicts often arise when private property rights obstruct public access to beaches. While the shoreline up to the high-water mark is provincial/federal Crown land (and thus open to the public), the surrounding land is frequently privately owned, limiting the public's ability to reach the shore^v. In many cases, legal ambiguity or lack of enforcement at the municipal level leaves residents uncertain about what their rights really are. [Click here](#) to read more about your coastal access rights in Nova Scotia.

Similarly, international agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), grant states sovereign rights over marine spaces, but they do not recognize Indigenous Nations as sovereign entities. This creates a problematic legal divide between terrestrial and marine governance, one that overlooks Indigenous worldviews and rights, and excludes them from key maritime decisions^{vi}.

While plural legal systems are likely unavoidable for Nova Scotia's coast, ensuring that each governing authority acknowledges the challenges they create—alongside the historical marginalization and power imbalances that shape them—could help reduce the negative impacts of such a complex legal system and, therefore, strengthen the overall governability of coastal areas.

Failed integration of multiple knowledge systems

The third defining characteristic of Nova Scotia's current coastal governance model is its ineffective use of scientific evidence in policymaking, which is particularly relevant to coastal environmental outcomes^{ix}. Policymakers often highlight the 'science-policy interface' as the gold standard for evidence-based decision-making, a way to ground policies in real-world data^x. But in practice, the authority of western science is not applied evenly: it is often ignored when inconvenient for policymakers, or revered in ways that crowd out Indigenous, local or experiential knowledge.

When the former is true—or where a wide gap in the science-policy interface exists—researchers have warned that decision-makers can sometimes over-correct by relying too heavily on scientists as truth-sayers^{xii}. In these cases, science is positioned as the only legitimate voice in the room, which not only excludes Indigenous and local knowledge but also risks creating policies that are disconnected from lived coastal realities^{xiii}.

When the latter is true, the science-policy interface is an example of the colonial use of science: knowledge produced by western institutions is considered to be objective truth, while knowledge produced locally (i.e. by Indigenous peoples) is sidelined as anecdotal or unscientific.

Nobody would deny that science has a crucial role to play in coastal management, but it must be carefully integrated into policymaking processes. Moreover, given the time-consuming and resource-intensive nature of scientific research, it often lags behind fast-moving coastal realities^{xiv}. When governance authorities rely too heavily—or too selectively—on science, they effectively close off opportunities to develop collaborative approaches that would integrate multiple knowledge systems^{xv}.

Together, these three settler colonial characteristics—state-led governance, fragmentation/legal pluralism, and the inconsistent application of multiple knowledge systems to policymaking—have created a coastal governance system that is poorly equipped to manage the growing conflicts along Nova Scotia’s coastline.

Other jurisdictions in Canada and abroad provide valuable lessons for Nova Scotia to draw from in addressing its persistent, multi-decade coastal governance challenges. The third and final blog in this series highlights examples of inclusive, bottom-up coastal governance that could inspire further debate among both activists and policymakers in tackling provincial issues.

Part III: How do we move forward?



Prospect Village during winter, Halifax Regional Municipality. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024)*.

While the shortcomings of Nova Scotia’s coastal governance system may be complicated to address, lessons can be drawn from alternative models that have already shown promise in addressing similar conflicts—both in Canada and abroad.

Environmental racism: the reproduction of race-based discrimination through the impacts of environmental damages, as well as exclusion from the decision-making processes that cause them.

In fact, African Nova Scotians have already explicitly stated their concerns about environmental racism along the coast. According to the [ENRICH Project](#)—a research program oriented towards climate justice for African Nova Scotians—inclusive decision-making, community empowerment, and capacity building should all be priorities for the government in order to avoid the kind of systemic marginalization that has characterized its governance models in the past.

The common thread among these models is an emphasis on **inclusive, bottom-up governance**, where those most affected by decisions play an active role in shaping them. On paper, this sounds simple: involve local people in local decisions. In practice, however, there is an important distinction between stakeholder engagement and true participatory processes.

Historically, engagement in Nova Scotia has meant things like town halls, consultation surveys, or requests for public support on pre-determined coastal legislation. But too often these result

in tokenistic exercises, allowing governments to claim community involvement while the real decisions are made elsewhereⁱ. This box-ticking approach leaves people feeling unheard, deepens mistrust, and even perpetuates systemic inequities such as environmental racismⁱⁱ.

Truly participatory processes go much further. They involve communities, Indigenous Nations, conservation groups, and other stakeholders in every stage of decision-making—from setting priorities and exploring options to implementing actions and reviewing results. These processes are iterative, unfolding over multiple phases, and focus on building the skills, relationships, and trust needed for everyone's voice to carry real weightⁱⁱⁱ. Done well, they bring together a diversity of stakeholders—each with their own values, knowledge systems, and lived experiences—who share responsibility for both the process and its outcomes. The result is not only more equitable management of the coast, but an approach that people are far more likely to buy into and remain committed to over time.

But even the best-intentioned participatory processes can fail if they overlook practical and structural barriers. Time, resources, and trust all matter. When participation is unpaid or logistically inaccessible, it effectively excludes those without the means to attend. On the other hand, when processes are designed with these realities in mind—by compensating participants for their time, ensuring meetings are culturally and geographically accessible, and fostering trust and continuity with government officials—participation becomes more equitable and the resulting decisions more legitimate^{iv}.

While this can be difficult to implement in the real world, there are examples—nationally and globally—which show what's possible when participation is meaningful and leadership is shared:

Furthermore, it is important to note that communities in Nova Scotia have long been willing to step up. Coastal users and residents have a documented history of organizing, consulting, and even implementing their own changes in Nova Scotia since the 1990s^x. Yet structural issues in governance—jurisdictional fragmentation, exclusion of Indigenous voices, and state dominance—still prevent those efforts from shaping real outcomes.



Coastal Protection Act rally at Province House, Halifax. *Nicolas Winkler Photography (2024).*

This brings us back to the question: *what role can each of us play in shaping the future of our coast?* Given the challenges we face, relying on fragmented, non-inclusive consultations that exclude genuine community leadership won't work; at some point, we must question the viability of the current governance model and push for broader, more inclusive coastal justice.

Coastal justice means making sure that access, benefits, and responsibilities are shared fairly. It means recognizing that decisions about the coast aren't just technical or legal, they're moral, cultural, and deeply personal. And it means ensuring that the voices of those most connected to the coast—whether through fishing, ceremony, science, or daily recreation—are heard and respected.

Whether that be through community co-management, Indigenous leadership, or another governance model that has yet to be explored, it is clear that there must be, at the very least, an open discussion about who should have decision-making power over the coast.

And while that is a conversation which no single person can be responsible for, it doesn't mean individuals can't make a difference—we just need to focus our energy where it counts most:

- **Ask critical questions:** Who's making the decisions? Whose voices are missing? How will this affect those not represented here?
- **Advocate for power-sharing:** Support locally-led and co-managed initiatives.
- **Challenge tokenism:** Learn to recognize the difference between box-ticking consultations and true participatory processes.

- **Push for systemic reform:** Encourage policies that create equitable, accessible, and well-resourced participation—not just more meetings.

Nova Scotia's coast is a shared space. So let's share its governance.