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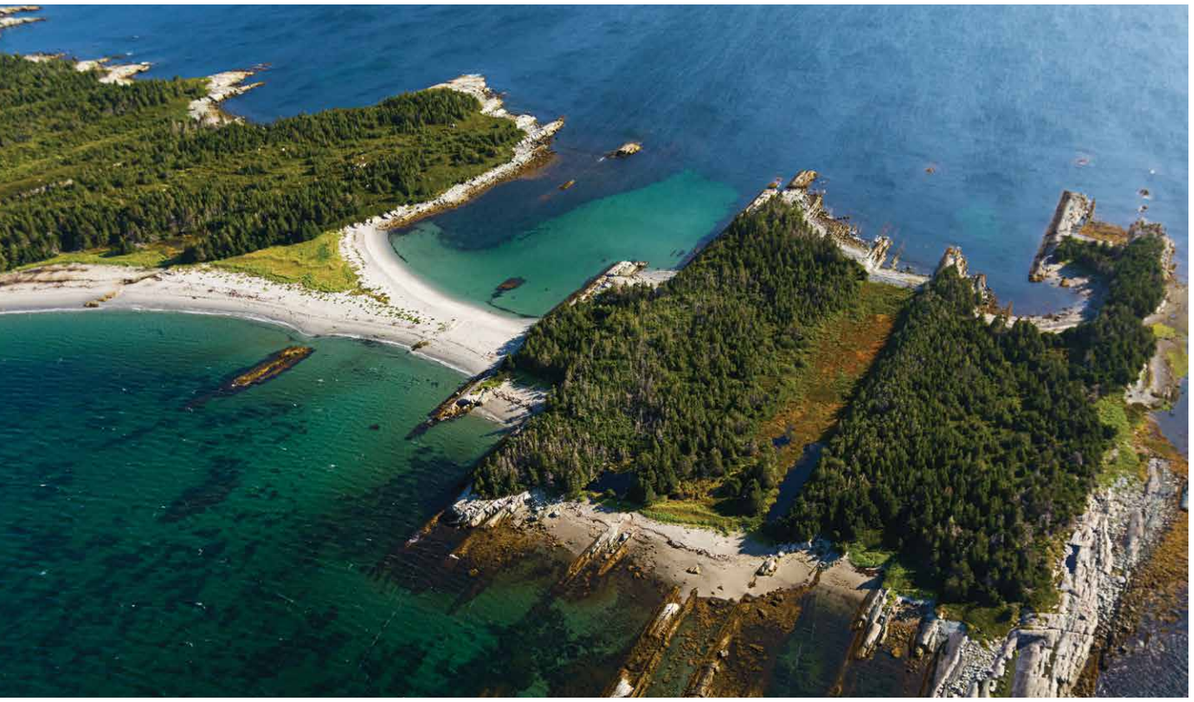
Treasured ISLANDS

Tales from the campaign to save a magical Nova Scotia archipelago

BY SILVER DONALD CAMERON
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK HAWKINS

Morning sunlight washes over seaweed-covered boulders and rocky outcrops on one of the islands along Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore.

TREASURED ISLANDS



THEY ARE SCATTERED all the way to the horizon, lying black on the glittering sea: wild islands, hundreds of them, unchanged since the last ice age. Scoured bedrock, brilliant white sand beaches, orange rockweed, erratic boulders the size of automobiles. Seals singing on the tiniest islets, kingfishers and terns in aerial ballets, lichens found nowhere else on this continent. Pilot whales and porpoises cruising offshore. Huge leatherback turtles browsing in the narrow waterways. And a rainforest of short, tough, wind-carved spruce, their branches draped with a pendulous lichen known locally as "old man's beard" hanging over a forest floor thick with spongy, deep-green moss.

These islands, encompassing more than 2,800 hectares, are poised to become Canada's newest coastal wilderness area, and perhaps its most accessible. Located an hour east of Halifax, they lie within a wide, shallow bay on Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore, stretching from Clam Harbour to Mushaboom — 55 kilometres by winding coastal highway from the city, 30 kilometres as the osprey flies. The Nova Scotia Nature Trust is raising $7 million to conserve the entire archipelago.

The Nature Trust calls its campaign "100 Wild Islands" — but the actual number is close to 300, and this is the third attempt to protect them. In the early 1970s, many of the islands were included in a proposal for a 580-square-kilometre Ship Harbour National Park. That project was sunk largely by the passionate opposition of residents, who did not wish their communities expropriated and bulldozed. The province then proposed a provincial park — but ultimately it protected only 15 square kilometres, split into two small seaside parks at Taylor Head and Clam Harbour Beach.

> *'Private land conservation on this scale has rarely been done anywhere in North America.'*

The situation remained that way for several decades, with the islands largely ignored except by locals. And then, in 2007, Paul Gauthier decided to build a cottage.

GAUTHIER IS A FORMER Silicon Valley entrepreneur who had grown up in the Halifax suburb of Cole Harbour. He had been fascinated with computers since 1983, when his parents bought him a primitive Commodore Vic 20. He was 11, and he had found his vocation. After a computer-science degree at Halifax's Dalhousie University, Gauthier enrolled in the PhD program at the University of California, where he and his instructor devised a way to link inexpensive workstation computers into a network that mimicked a supercomputer. Their company, Inktomi, gained customers such as Yahoo! and AOL. In his mid-20s, Gauthier became a wealthy man.

An ardent outdoorsman, Gauthier wanted to build a cottage on acreage somewhere along the long-neglected Eastern Shore. Not finding a suitable property, he consulted the Nature Trust. Both parties were shocked to discover that the whole coast had already been subdivided, though relatively few of the properties had yet been developed.

The undeveloped offshore islands, on the other hand, were unpopulated and much less fragmented. They looked like a unique conservation opportunity. It was already too late to preserve large tracts of the coast itself, but the protection of a whole archipelago could be a landmark achievement, provided that the islands were really worth preserving. Gauthier remained anonymous during the first seven years of his involvement, but Bonnie Sutherland, the Nature Trust's executive director, makes it clear that the Trust could never have considered so ambitious a project without his constant support.

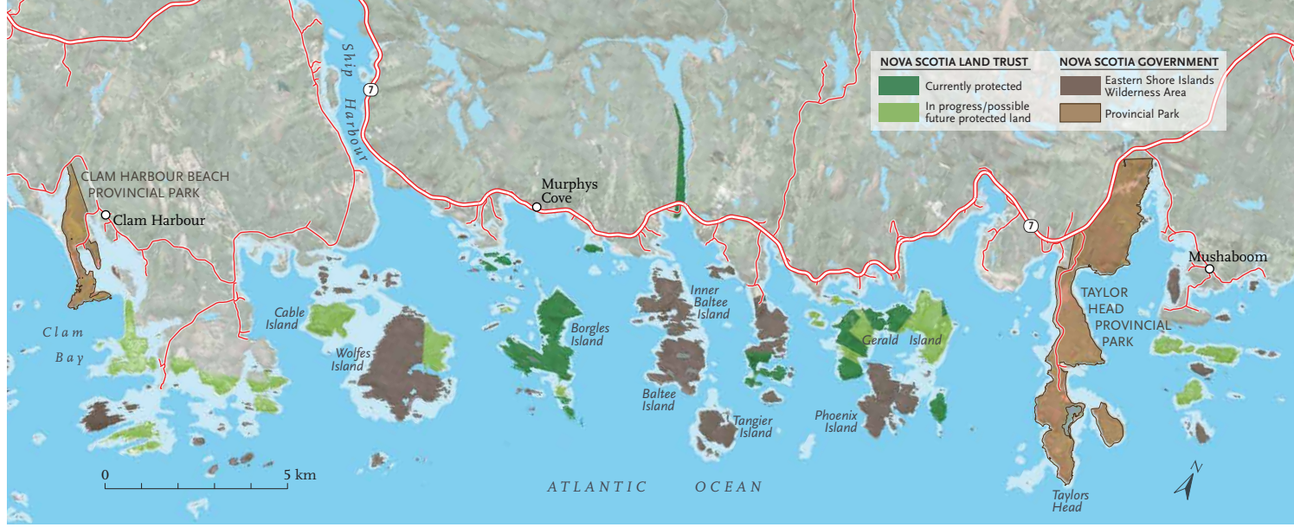
"When Paul first approached the Nature Trust we didn't even know if the islands justified conservation," says Sutherland. "He invested in the ecological research we needed to answer that basic question." At that point, the Trust didn't know who owned all the islands, whether the owners would be interested in conservation, or even whether the province of Nova Scotia could be convinced to protect the Crown-owned islands. And, she says, "We didn't know the community's reaction — although we did know there had been tremendous opposition to the national park proposal."

Since the 1970s, however, people on the Eastern Shore had seen other coastlines succumb to the growth of the hotels, theme parks, golf courses and gated communities that constitute development on most of the world's coastlines, and by 2011, when the Nature Trust launched its Wild Islands campaign, the communities were vigorously resisting the imposition of industrial salmon feedlots into the area's coves and inlets. Locals had always used the islands themselves for hunting, fishing, picnicking and boating — but development loomed there, too; Borgles Island, 215 hectares in size, had been bought and surveyed for a golf course, with an airstrip, to be ringed by seaside mansions. An archipelago barred to development might permanently guarantee access to the islands for their traditional uses.

A pristine environment had also emerged as an economic asset.

"We air-ship live lobsters to 21 countries," says Stewart Lamont of Tangier Lobster, whose plant overlooks the islands. "We market them as premium-quality traceable lobsters from the cold, clean North Atlantic. Pristine is our brand. It's what we sell."

"I was sort of skeptical about it, to be honest with you," says Brian Murphy, who operates Murphy's Camping on the Ocean in Murphys Cove. "But we had a lot of meetings, and now people around here really appreciate the Wild Islands project. I think we're going to get busier with tourism — I did two boat tours



Harbour seals (RIGHT) are just one of the many wildlife species found on the archipelago. An aerial view of the beach connecting Borgles Island (OPPOSITE, left) and Middle Island.

MAPS: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO

Silver Donald Cameron is an award-winning writer who lives in Halifax. Nick Hawkins is a New Brunswick-based wildlife photographer.

Clockwise from OPPOSITE TOP: seaweed in the intertidal zone around Borgles Island; crab shells on Little Ship Rock shoal; a round-leaved sundew growing in a bog on one of the islands; the shallow, clear water around Borgles Island. A school of sand lance darts through the water (RIGHT).

today and dropped off a couple of people for overnight camping. It could be another Peggys Cove or Cabot Trail."

FORMED IN 1994, the Nature Trust has become one of Nova Scotia's most-respected environmental organizations. Its early supporters included such high-profile conservationists as Robert Bateman and Farley Mowat, and its approach was flexible and consultative, responsive to local concerns, respectful of the traditional uses of the islands. As Sutherland notes, it aimed to foster a "community ethic of stewardship" to monitor the islands on a day-to-day basis.

Some of the Trust's projects involve outright ownership — in 2007, for instance, Farley and Claire Mowat donated their 81-hectare seaside farm to the Trust — but many use a "conservation easement" — an agreement with a landowner that permanently limits the uses of a parcel of land to protect its conservation values. The easement becomes part of the property deed, so the restriction remains with the land no matter who buys it later. The owner retains the use of the land, perhaps reserving a portion for purposes other than conservation; Paul Gauthier, for example, has reserved a couple of campsites on island properties where he has given easements to the Trust.

Nova Scotia's policy climate had also changed. In 2007, the province's legislature unanimously passed the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act, which committed the government to protect at least 12 per cent of Nova Scotia's land by 2015 — a goal it will actually surpass, albeit after that initial target date. The Eastern Shore islands were not part of the act's original action plan, but an attempt to conserve them would clearly be in harmony with the province's own vision. And the province owned 60 per cent of the islands in question.

So the circumstances were promising, but the project was daunting. "The Nature Trust had never attempted anything near this scale, and in fact private land conservation on this scale has rarely been done anywhere in North America," says Sutherland. "And on the fundraising side, this is an incredibly ambitious campaign. The Nature Trust had never attempted to raise anything like $7 million."

The fact that these islands will persist as wilderness is little short of miraculous.

At the start of the campaign, however, Gauthier committed $1.5 million — a gesture that galvanized landowners, potential donors and the government. It was stunning, says Sutherland, because large donations for conservation are rare. Environmental causes receive only about two per cent of charitable giving, and the bulk of that goes to animal welfare. But Gauthier was enjoying himself.

"One of the things that's been exciting about this whole project is that in a lot of ways we were figuring this out as we went along," he says. "This started as just a crazy idea and has snowballed into something substantial — and it's been fun to be along for that ride. To me, that's a pretty exciting way to participate in a philanthropic project like this."

Gauthier later contributed another $2 million in matching funds. By the summer of 2015, the campaign had raised 90 per cent of its $7-million target and the Nature Trust had protected 70 per cent of the archipelago, including all the major islands like Borgles. Meanwhile, the province had protected all the islands owned by the Crown.

The islands are, in a way, a family — a unit composed of individuals, related but distinct, mutually supportive, constantly interacting. Martin Willison, a retired biology professor from Dalhousie University and a founder of the Nature Trust, notes that if an island burns, its neighbours re-seed it. Birds, insects and small mammals move easily between some islands but not others. The archipelago is a superb place to study biogeography, and in the future it may provide a venue to study re-wilding, or to re-establish breeding colonies of high-priority birds such as common eiders and harlequin ducks.

Given the complexity that surrounds them, the fact that these islands will persist as wilderness is little short of miraculous.

"Ten years ago, this couldn't have happened," Gauthier says. "And 10 years from now, maybe it would be too hard to rally everyone — but in 2011, it seemed like everything was lined up."

"Paul's commitment really lit the fuse," Sutherland says. The Wild Islands initiative has since drawn on the efforts of hundreds of people, and now "a big, beautiful stretch of the Nova Scotia coast is going to be protected, intact. Forever."

See more of Nick Hawkins' images of the islands at mag.cangeo.ca/dec15/islands.