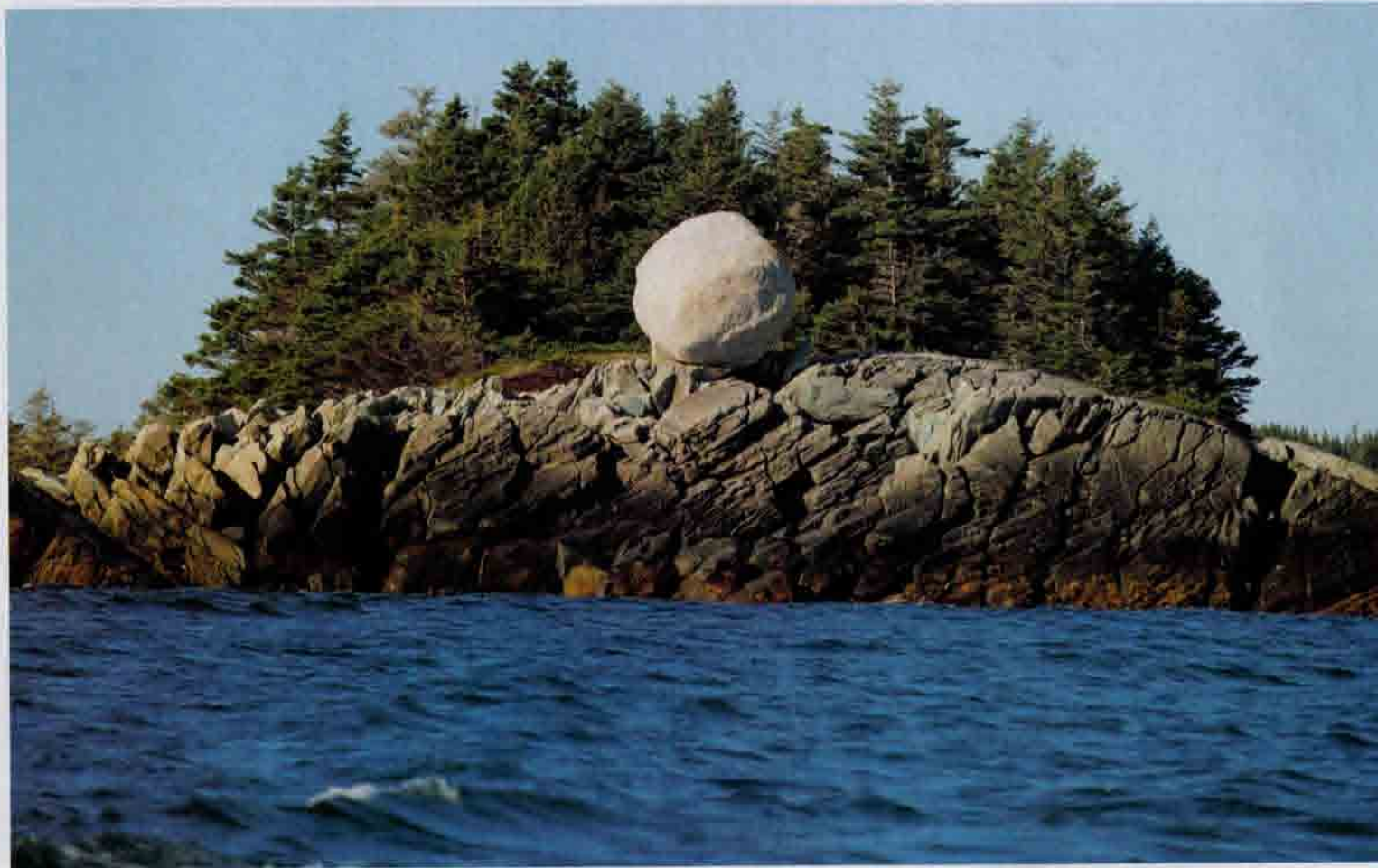




ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

They are metaphors for utopian paradise. And also real places where distinct human, wild and biological cultures and ways of life thrive. Atlantic Canada has more islands than most regions in the world. Writer **John DeMont** explores why they matter. Photography by **Ryan Taplin**



Borgles Island — 215 hectares of drumlin, glacial till, white sand beach and ancient boreal rainforest — requires commitment. It's 20 minutes by motorboat off the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. Then a person must bushwhack through forest running right down to the beach until you reach a place where the sun finally penetrates.

"This is it," says Peter Green, conservation co-ordinator for the Nova Scotia Nature Trust. "This was where they wanted to put the airstrip."

It is a head-spinning notion: the terrain rolls and pitches here. Though the excavation happened in the 1980s — the first excavators sank deep into the boggy ground — nature has all but reclaimed the



(Photo top): Looking like a giant snowball, this rock formation appears on the verge of falling into the ocean. (Above): Borgles Island, about a 20-minute boat ride from Murphy Cove, is one dot in an archipelago off the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia.

land. But well-heeled folk from New York, Rhode Island and Massachusetts — who may or may not have included the singer Kenny Rogers — tried.

They tried to develop lots on the island in the middle of nowhere, where they could sip martinis after landing their private planes. Later on, another prosperous group even tossed around the idea of a golf course on the island, also known as Charles.

It all sounds a bit wacky. And we can breathe a collective sigh of relief that Borgles is now mostly owned by the nature trust, which will protect it for generations to come, rather than by guys in plus-fours with too much money to burn.

Standing in that stretch of low



forest and swamp where the only sound is wind and the birds that nest there, a person is struck by the folly of their big dreams.

But you are also left with a sense of wonder, too. People like to own things. The universal impulse that draws them to islands, on the other hand, is something else altogether.

A preserve where nature can't be messed with by man. A paradise where the mores of society don't apply. A refuge when the rest of the world is just too much. A sanctuary where humans can control what goes in and what, if anything, comes out.

It's hard to know what exactly it is about islands.

It's the solitude and isolation for Philip Thompson, a poet and freelance writer who has lived in a solar-powered home on Cross Island in Petpeswick Inlet off the Eastern Shore for 20 years.

"I love independence and the Zen of simple tasks like gathering kindling, kayaking, splitting firewood, being in direct touch with all four seasons, storms, wind, fog and sun," he says. "My

(Clockwise from top) This piece of boggy land is where well-heeled Americans envisioned an airstrip in the 1980s. Pristine beaches and verdant vistas welcome intrepid visitors to the islands off the Eastern Shore that the Nova Scotia Nature Trust is seeking to protect as part of its 100 Wild Islands Legacy Campaign.

nearest neighbours are more than a thousand feet away. Most of them are great people, but I enjoy deciding who comes to visit."

So does Ned Zimmerman, who lives in Montreal but whenever possible makes for Great Island in Medway Harbour on the South Shore, where the web developer and theatre student spent the first four years of his life.

"There is . . . something very valuable about learning to live within the rhythm of the tides — it puts one's own schedules and priorities in perspective against something more basic," Zimmerman adds.

Chris Krolow, who owns Private Islands magazine and also hosts





HGTV's *Island Hunters* reality television series, says the desire to own an island is rooted in a hankering for "a little piece of the world that I can take care of and look after."

Which is fitting, since islands are as much easy metaphor as they are a real chunk of sand, soil, rock and forest surrounded by water.

No wonder then that when Paul Gauguin, at 35, decided to forgo life as a bank teller for the painter's easel, he headed for an island.

Or that when writers from Thomas More (*Utopia*) to William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*) wanted to portray an alternative

society, they chose an island as the setting. (So much literature has been spawned by stories like this that there's actually a name for the desert island genre: Robinsonade, which takes its name from Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*.)

They just seem to get into a person's soul in a way that's hard to explain.

"An island always pleases my imagination," wrote Henry David Thoreau, who knew a thing or two about isolated places. "Even a bare grassy isle which I can see entirely over at a glance has some undefined and mysterious charm for me."

Being crazed about islands is

common enough that there's a word for it — *nesomania* — and a reasonable explanation for the obsession: perhaps, on some deep level, we just understand how important islands are to the rest of the world.

After all, over half of the roughly 5,000 languages left on Earth are spoken on islands, says Godfrey Baldacchino, Canada Research Chair in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island.

The isolation also tends to breed some of the most distinct cultures on Earth, whether in the Cape Verde archipelago off western Africa or Cape Breton, which has only been connected to the

mainland by a causeway since 1955. It's not just people that make islands matter. Consider Borgles and the dozens of other islands in the Bay of Islands archipelago.

Some 120 species of birds make their homes there. On those islands, which are devoid of predators like foxes, rats and coyotes and have few full-time human residents, are what scientists refer to as old-growth forests that have been undisturbed since the last ice age, along with every coastal habitat native to Nova Scotia: salt marshes, sheltered bays, rocky headlands, coastal barrens and sand dunes.

"I don't know of anywhere else in Canada, with the exception of the Broken Group Islands (on the west coast of Vancouver Island), where you could find a collection of islands that is this ecologically rich," says Bonnie Sutherland, executive director of the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, which has mounted a campaign to acquire and protect 100 of the Eastern Shore islands.

And, in a way, perhaps that helps answer the ringing question about why islands matter. Because, no matter how small their circumference, they are big enough to offer people whatever they need. Whether it's an escape, or the journey's end. ■

✉ jdemont@herald.ca
 @CH_coalblackhr

John DeMont is senior writer and columnist for *The Chronicle Herald*.