

The Bras d'Or Stewardship Society

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Bras d'Or Stewardship Society
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THE BLUE HERON

The Bras d'Or Stewardship Society

P.O. Box 158, Baddeck, Nova Scotia B0E 1B0

VOLUME IV

JUNE, 2001

NO.1

The newsletter of *The Bras d'Or Stewardship Society* informs society members and interested individuals of the society's activities. Newsworthy events that have a direct impact on the Bras d'Or Lakes and its watershed are topics of our newsletter focus.

Our past newsletters focused on issues that threaten the “**environmental integrity**” of the Bras d'Or Lakes. There is a tendency to concentrate on the **negative** and **adverse** topics such as sewage issues, shoreline scarification, substandard water quality and the lack of enforcement of existing government regulations. Some might sense our approach has been more negative than positive. Our contention is, however, that a well-informed public better secures the

future responsible stewardship of the Bras d'Or Lakes.

This current issue of *The Blue Heron* focuses on a **positive** more **upbeat** tenor. For those who may perceive the Bras d'Or Lakes as a large benign body of water with little activity other than summer-time recreational pursuits, this newsletter should dispel such myth. Currently, there is a mother lode of activity directed towards the Bras d'Or Lakes. Much of this activity has been generated from our persistent efforts over the last four years to foster an action-oriented approach to the Bras d'Or Lakes. We know that *passivity* is prescription for a *laissez-faire attitude* with regards to taking care of the Bras d'Or.

In this edition, you will read about the creation of a new position by the **Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labor** to deal specifically with the Bras d'Or Lakes. This is a most important step in recognizing the need for accountable monitoring of the Bras d'Or Lakes environment. The society feels directly responsible for

the creation of this position through our forceful and direct communications with various levels of government.

You will read about the creation of a new web site focused singularly on the Bras d'Or Lakes. The society has partnered with the **Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission** to create the **PIKS (Paqtatek-Prism Inter-active Knowledge System)** web site and bring it on line. We are grateful for assistance from **Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation** for providing the necessary funding to recruit and hire the expertise to build this web site. The site is user friendly and provides the capability for anyone to put information concerning the Bras d'Or Lakes on the site for consumption on a global scale. The oft quoted mantra, “**think globally, act locally**” is optimally

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“Our Goal is to Protect, Conserve and Restore
the Bras d'Or Lakes”



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served through focused web site development.

You will read about the **River Deny's Basin Project**. This project pin-points land sources of pollution, a first step in cleaning up this once valuable oyster-producing ground. It is part of a broader sustainable community's initiative, a program recently created by federal and provincial government departments. We are pleased to see such cooperation. The linking of clean water with economic potential of expansion of oyster production within the Bras d'Or Lakes is a key component for sustainable development of the Bras d'Or Lake's shellfish industry.

Our society is proud to have on our board an active oyster producer who almost singularly has created the **Nova Scotia Oyster Growers Association**. This new entity will have a key role to play in the future success of the oyster fishery in the Bras d'Or Lakes.

You will read about water quality with regards to well water. Many households bordering the Bras d'Or Lakes are dependant on individual wells or cisterns to provide potable drinking water.

Recent events in Walkerton, Ontario have served to remind us that contaminated drinking water is no joke, but indeed a very real threat to human life. As pressures grow for increased water consumption so does our individual responsibility to protect water quality. We must all act to mitigate contamination of

Getting Connected

Stakeholders around the Bras d'Or Lakes watershed will have an opportunity to get online with the Paqtatek-Prism Inter-active Knowledge System (PIKS). PIKS is a website that provides easy access to information on projects, reports, publications, organizations, data and other areas of interest around the watershed. It is also inter-active and allows people to post information, exchange ideas, ask questions or participate in discussions.

The word *Paqtatek* comes from a Mi'Kmaq word that can be described as light rays emitting from the earth, representing knowledge and truth. The

local domestic drinking water sources.

Scanning the horizon in early May revealed the presence of the research vessel *Navicula*. Many who see this red-hulled vessel have no idea what this boat is doing. The fact is, the *Navicula's* crew are continuing their research concerning the profile of fish stocks in the Bras d'Or Lakes. These current surveys identify species type and egg mass counts to monitor existing fish populations. Not too many years ago there was an abundant herring fishery in the Bras d'Or Lakes. Today, the herring fishery is closed. One of the society's board members has made it his current "*raison d'être*" to promote continued fish population research within the Bras d'Or Lakes. The society fully supports this important continuing research for understanding the dynamics of local fish populations and habitat.

Last, but not least, everyone receiving this issue of **THE BLUE HERON** will receive a brochure from the Living by the Water Association. The brochure is available Canada wide as a promotional endeavor supporting the responsible development of land contiguous to shorelines. We urge you to visit their web site: www.livingbythewater.ca. We hope that you enjoy this first newsletter of 2001.

Henry W. Fuller
Treasurer, Bras d'Or Stewardship Society

PIKS system itself is developed from another interactive system called the Quebec-Labrador Integrated Knowledge System (QLINKS) that was first used to exchange information over the vast area of the Canadian Arctic. PIKS is designed to facilitate information exchange among stakeholders of the Bras d'Or Lakes.

Information exchange is key to the long-term management of the lakes, however information about the Bras d'Or Lakes is sometimes difficult to access. Some vital information may be at a local library, or with a government agency or community group.

Jim Morrow: Media, Responsibility and the Environment

Every story we hear or read in the media has a human element and a responsibility to go with it. Jim Morrow, owner, editor and journalist for the *Victoria Standard*, addressed issues of responsibility, media and the environment at the annual general meeting of the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society, held April 21/01 at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck.

According to Morrow, the media has a responsibility to keep information flowing; the reporter has a responsibility to present that information; and the reader has the responsibility to understand and evaluate the issues and act according to their conscience. He makes it clear that if change is called for, it must come from the public, not the media or the journalist. He says, "Although it is tempting for the media to call for action, the media is compelled to present information, not interpret it."

To remain a viable business, the media must continually gather and distribute information. Morrow calls the media a beast with an insatiable appetite for news. He says environmental issues, like other important issues are merely "bails of fodder" for this beast. Environmental issues compete with health issues, economic issues and the like, for media attention.

Pat Bates, Chairman of the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society, sees the appointment of a Bras d'Or Lake Coordinator as necessary for the long-term protection of the lake. "We have already permitted the condition of the Bras d'Or Lake to be harmed," Bates says. "It is now an obligation we all share to correct our bad sewage disposal practices and return the entire lake to its original pristine condition."

Suitor sees success in the works. She says, "Municipalities are now talking about developing a strategy...the levels of government are genuinely committed to finding a solution."

While Suitor sees opportunity for success, she also recognizes some of the challenges that lay ahead. There is the sheer size of the geographical area of the Bras d'Or Lake to work within, as well as the different concerns and priorities of the people who live and work around the lake that must be addressed.

The challenge for groups and organizations is how to get a topic or issue into the media machine. According to Morrow, "Effective use of the media by environmental activists or any other interest group is in knowing how the industry works and how to present the industry with the information." Making an issue into a media event, he points out, has been a successful media strategy for the environmental organization Greenpeace.

Morrow turns his attention to the reporting aspect of the media. "Media," he says, "has the privileged perspective of learning from all sides of any issue. How it presents the information is determined by the strength and quality of the journalist—the human element." While he readily admits that *how* information is reported in the media can influence public opinion on an issue, he maintains that in the end, it is the public who has the responsibility of making the decisions, "It is the media's responsibility to present clear objective facts so the public can make sound informed decisions."

Heather Atiyah,
Community Facilitator, PIKS

According to Suitor, various groups, people and communities often have their own agendas that can sometimes create cross issues. For example, there is the issue of clean water for aquaculture versus the public's concern about waste from mussel farms. It is Suitor's job to address these concerns and work with all those concerned to find solutions.

Working with the various stakeholders around the lake poses its own challenge. "Community groups traditionally see the government as the bad guy," Suitor says. Despite this, she is optimistic that communities, groups, individuals and government can indeed work together. "Negotiations with governments today are not like the past," she says. "Governments are genuinely committed to finding solutions to the problems."

For questions and concerns about water quality call (902) 535 3830, fax (902) 535 2239

Wells and Water

This letter, in an expanded form was first written to CBC in January as a response to the investigative reporting on the "Garland Water Woes". Hopefully, these summarized comments will be of interest to our subscribers. - Lynn Baechler, Hydrogeologist

My past 30 years of experience in Nova Scotia has shown that poor and/or old well construction often contributes to poor water quality. Virtually all shallow dug wells, no matter how well they are constructed, will report the presence of bacteria at one time or another. If there is no contaminant source nearby, the bacteria may be found to be contributed by simple, harmless soil organisms.

When we construct our wells and on-site sewage disposal systems we often cut corners and do things the cheap way rather than the right way. When a homeowner has a choice of 20 or 40 feet of casing, in their drilled well, they will likely choose 20 - it's cheaper. But someday, when the housing density increases nearby, with all its associated potential contaminant sources, or more road salt is applied to the highway so these people can travel safely under winter conditions, they run into problems and look for someone to blame.

An old well (drilled or dug) often goes hand in hand with an old or non-existent on-site sewage system. Inadequate (undersized, poorly constructed) on-site sewage disposal systems can be major contributors to surface and ground water quality problems.

Another reason for the proliferation of poor water supplies both bacterially and chemically is ignorance. We say about many things "buyer beware". People are buying land, unknowingly, which will be very costly or impossible to obtain a potable water supply. This is particularly true with water front properties around the Bras d'Or Lakes. Everyone wants to be there, but they will have to accept the consequences of the underlying geologic conditions (a well influenced by gypsum is not a good well). Small communities with inadequate water supplies, continue to grow. As residential numbers increase, the problem is magnified. Perhaps, the unavailability of potable water should be a restriction on community growth and development.

Historically, people have gone to cisterns, perhaps this should be looked on today as a more acceptable technology (rainwater harvesting) for solving individual water problems.

The Nova Scotia Department of Environment has a current publication "Before You Construct a Water Well" (first published in 1968). This publication addresses planning, developing and maintaining a water supply. Educating the public regarding water supplies is not a new thing in Nova Scotia. The Department of Environment and before that the Department of Mines, made this information available to the public. The publications were free, people just had to read them.

The Nova Scotia government owns the ground and surface water in this province. They want to protect this resource, we want to use it. However, it is **our** responsibility, whether we are subdivision or rural home owners, farmers, industrialists, governmental agencies etc, to see that the activities on our own property do not impact the water resources on or off our property in a negative way.

*Lynn Baechler,
Hydrogeologist*

A Helping Hand

Water quality in the Bras d'Or Lakes has always been the primary focus of the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society and it looks like we are getting some serious help from the Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour.

As of January 1, 2001, a position within the Department was created to oversee clean water issues around the lake. Laurie Sutor, the newly appointed Bras d'Or Lakes Coordinator, is meeting with individuals, community groups and representatives of municipal, provincial and federal governments, in hopes of developing strategies that will protect the lake from sewage contamination. She calls it "sewage responsibility" and explains that it encompasses all areas of sewage: sewage discharged from cottages, boats and municipalities.

PIKS is designed to bring information together on one website. Heather Atiyah, one of two Community Facilitators working on PIKS says, "PIKS brings information together in one place and gives us an overview of activity around the lakes."

What kinds of information are we talking about? According to George Paul, the other Community Facilitator working with Atiyah, information can be anything that relates to the watershed. Paul explains that one of the hallmarks of PIKS is that it is *community driven*. "People, organizations, businesses, government departments, aboriginal groups can participate and choose what to place online," he says. "Information can be about community events, projects, services, programs—pretty much anything about the lakes."

PIKS also has features that have wide-range appeal for anyone wanting to place information online. There is no charge to use this system, and the information is secure through a password and logon known only to the user.

Although PIKS has great potential, its success does depend largely on stakeholder participation. According to Atiyah, one of the biggest challenges of the project is convincing people and organizations to place information online. "PIKS is a work in progress," she says. "It is only as good as the information online and that goes back to stakeholders."

Pat Bates, Chair of the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society also sees the potential of PIKS. Bates says, "PIKS represents an opportunity to apply modern-day interactive communication systems to the surveillance, monitoring and care of the Bras d'Or Lake, one of Nova Scotia's great resources."

The Bras d'Or Stewardship Society, along with the Una'maki Institute of Natural Resources, is actively overseeing the PIKS project. Other partners in the PIKS project include Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission, University College of Cape Breton, Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and Environment Canada.

For more information on the PIKS project, visit the PIKS website at <http://link.quick.to/piks> or call (902) 379-2024 to find out how you or your organization can get connected!

*Heather Atiyah
Community Facilitator, PIKS*

NEWS ITEMS

DFO CONFERENCE:

In February 2001, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans held a day-long conference at the Canadian Coast Guard College in Point Edward, Cape Breton. This conference was a follow-up initiative to a previous event focused on the Bras d'Or Lakes. A broad-based group of interested individuals attended. The purpose was to update the public regarding various research initiatives currently in progress within the confines of the Bras d'Or Lakes. The results of these research endeavors will be published in a volume solely devoted to the Bras d'Or Lakes.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING:

The Society's Annual General Meeting was held on April 21, 2001 after being cancelled in March due to a heavy snow. This meeting reviewed the activities of the Society, presented financial statements for year 2000, and elected board members to fill board positions. Jim Morrow, editor of the Victoria Standard, was the guest speaker.

UPGRADE OF BADDECK SEWER SYSTEM:

In January 2001, elected municipal and village officials made a presentation to the Society's board regarding the progress on obtaining funding for the upgrading of Baddeck's sewer system. This is a 1.8 million-dollar project. Monies have been applied for through the Canada Infrastructure Program. To date, no official word has been received regarding the funding for the replacement of Baddeck's inadequate sewer treatment facility.

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT:

The Society will hire a student to work on a specified project during the summer 2001. Getting students involved in the future stewardship of the Bras d'Or Lakes is an important component of our goal to preserve, protect and restore the Bras d'Or Lakes and its watershed.

Denys Basin:

A pilot project to restore a watershed on the Bras d'Or Lakes.

Local citizens can make a difference! Denys Basin has been chosen as a pilot area for a watershed management initiative. The project started in 1997 when people began expressing concerns about the quality of the water on the River Denys Basin. Oyster beds were being closed in what was traditionally one of the most productive oyster areas in the province, and the shutdown was due in part to fecal coliform pollution. A workshop was held 1997 with the end result being the recommendation to form an advisory group to address the problems in the watershed.

Since that time two groups have been formed, The Stewards of the River Denys Watershed Assoc. in 1999 (SRDWA) and The Denys Watershed Advisory Group (DWAG) in 2000.

During the summer of 2000 the SRDWA group was very active with a restoration project in the upper watershed. To address the specific concerns in Denys Basin proper, the DWAG was formed. The goals of the advisory group are:

- to improve the water quality of the Denys Basin Watershed to a point where sustainable shellfish harvesting may be restored to previous (or higher) historic levels;
- to raise the level of public awareness of the value and importance of clean water in the Denys Basin Watershed (both for drinking and for shellfish [fish]); and
- to decrease the amount of silt entering the Denys Basin

A number of programs are currently underway with additional ones planned for 2001-02. A water sampling program and a sanitary shoreline survey, being carried out jointly by the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission and Environment Canada is currently underway to identify potential sources of pollution in the watershed. A survey has been undertaken to assess the potential value of shellfish if the closed areas could be reopened, a resource sur-

vey is being planned for this summer and information will be collected on the chemistry and currents within the Basin. Mapping of the bottom habitat was begun in 1999 and will continue this year.

It is essential to work with the residents to solve the problems in a cost-effective manner. A number of organizations and citizens are involved in the project and include: the Denys Basin Watershed Advisory Group; The Stewards of the River Denys Watershed Assoc.; the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission; the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society; The Nova Scotia Oyster Growers Assoc.; the Orangedale Water Society; Environment Canada; DFO-Oceans & Coastal Management Division; the NS Department of Labor & Environment and the Department of Agriculture & Fisheries as well as a number of local concerned residents.

The long-term goal is the clean up the Bras d'Or Lakes, and the Denys Basin initiative is the pilot project whose results can be applied to the whole area.

*Dave Duggan,
Oceans and Coastal Management Division,
Fisheries & Oceans Canada*

It is essential to work with the residents to solve the problems in a cost-effective manner.

Oyster Growers

Oyster growers around the Bras d'Or Lakes have taken a page from the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society, formed an organization and are taking their concerns to government. The Nova Scotia Oyster Growers Association was created last winter and has 26 members. Jim Crawford, the Chair and founding member of the Association says, "It's a long overdue need to have a united voice to sit with government at the table and present concerns, be heard...to be respected as an industry."

Crawford, who has been an oyster fisher since 1994, recognizes that the oyster industry is an industry with enormous potential. Last year, according to the Nova Scotia Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, oyster growers around the province produced 650,916 Kg. of oyster, the bulk of that coming from the Bras d'Or Lakes.

With numbers like that, Crawford sees the oyster industry as a key component to economic development in rural areas. He says, "The most successful tact for any community is not to get too far from their initial roots...in light of that, there is no question aquaculture is here to stay."

With that in mind, Crawford is taking his business one step further and building a processing plant. "This venture has all been done through private venture capital," he says. "This is a huge movement in Cape Breton Island...that there are private investors out there who have faith in our communities that there will be profit building...for instance in oysters."

Crawford, like other growers and users of the Bras d'Or Lakes, knows that the future of the Bras d'Or Lakes rests on clean water. "Public and government agencies have to stand at the plate and address the trend of shellfish bed closures," he says. "Everything in aquaculture hinges on the wholesomeness of the water."

The strict guidelines governing water quality and aquaculture leaves little room for water deteriora-

tion. When shellfish beds are closed, the grower is moved to another site. Sometimes the bottom quality of the new site is not suitable for growing oysters on the bottom, or the site may be in a location that is difficult to protect from theft. Sometimes it is the more practical problem of how an oyster grower is expected to relocate hundreds of thousands of oysters that measure as little as 3/4 of an inch.

Crawford does see progress surrounding issues of clean water. Municipalities around the lakes are

coming together to discuss water quality problems and he acknowledges there is more public awareness about sewage contamination. However, sewage from malfunctioning septic tanks, straight pipes and boats without holding tanks, continues to contaminate the water and consequently closes shellfish beds around the lakes. "It is simple," he says, "When you dump sewage into the water,

you are putting people's health at risk...you are also jeopardizing the livelihoods of families who depend on shellfish for their income."

This year there are close to 40 shellfish bed closures around the lakes. Shellfish have been described as the "canary in the sea" when it comes to water quality. Closures of shellfish beds indicate that water quality is deteriorating.

*Heather Atiyah
Community Facilitator, PIKS*

Did you know: the sewage from one person in one day can contaminate one acre of water and force shellfish bed closures?