

The Formation of the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society (BSS)

With the gift of hindsight there is a tendency to see one or a small number of events as being critical to the formation of an organization like the BSS. As with similar groups this is only part of the truth.

In the case of the BSS pointers go back thirty years or more with a series of consultations, workshops, conferences, task forces reports etc that indicated a growing interest in what was happening in and around the Lakes. Probably the earliest most significant of these were two reports by UCCB's Bras d'Or Institute under the leadership of Don Arsenault. The first on Aquaculture in 1975 and the second a Management Plan for the Bras d'Or Lakes in the early eighties. In a government report of 1977 this perceptive comment can be found. "Much is studied; little is implemented." Now ain't that the truth! Conference followed conference, study followed study, workshop followed workshop leaving in their wake little but reports gathering dust on shelves. Some years later the Bras d'Or Institute was shut down for lack of funds and remained in limbo for years.

In the early nineties there were four events which had a direct influence on the formation of the BSS. The first was the 'Future of the Bras d'Or Lakes' conference held at Beinn Bhreagh in Oct 1991. One of the speakers was Pat Bates who as Vice President and Chief Operating Officer (CO) of ECBC provided funds for that conference. The second was the Baddeck Area Business and Tourist Association (BABTA) sponsored US/UK/CN 'Countrywide Stewardship Exchange' conference at the Inverary Inn in Baddeck in Oct 1992. This was organized by the then chair of BABTA Henry Fuller. The third was the creation of the first private land conservation group in Nova Scotia, the 'Bras d'Or Lakes Preservation Foundation' (BLPF) in 1993 by Grosvenor Blair. And fourth the 'Bras d'Or Lakes Working Group' under the auspices of UCCB and chaired by Rod Carrow with funds provided by ECBC (Pat was still the CO at the time.) Henry was one of the fifteen members of the Working Group.

In January 1995 this widely based group produced a report proposing drastic changes for the governance of the Bras d'Or. The then DNR Minister Wayne Adams, shot this fledgling out of its nest before it had flapped a wing. The repudiation of all the good work done by the Working Group strongly suggested to a number of largely disconnected people that if anything was to be done an advocacy organization of some sort was needed that was not dependent on government funds for either its formation or continuing existence.

At the time I was one those 'disconnected people' and in March 1996 circulated a letter to nine or ten people I knew, noting the demise of the Working Group and other such ventures and suggested "One way... ..to reverse this process is to form a (voluntary) organization of interested and concerned people..." If the quantity who

responded was poor the quality was not; the two responders were Lloyd Stone and Henry Fuller.

Among other things the latter pointed out there already was an organization in existence the Bras d'Or Lakes the BLPF of which I was then unaware. Since this was the case, with a view to either joining or setting up some kind of joint organization in association with the BLPF, a small changing group met with its Board (which then included Denne Burchell QC. He subsequently joined the BSS Board on a few occasions.) It soon became clear for a number of reasons we were not going to be able to work together. Not least because the BLPF was not the type of community based open membership organization we had in mind and, as Denne Burchell pointed out, it was a conservation easement organization with charitable status and not an advocacy group. We had to go our own way. That this was easier said than done as can be seen from a letter I wrote to Henry on Oct 22 1996 the opening sentence of which is; "Once again I am on about the formation of some sort of organization for the Bras d'Or..."

On Oct 18 1996 the BLPF held a public meeting at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum (AGB) in Baddeck, which Henry, Lloyd Stone and I attended. The main objective of which was to educate the public about Conservation Easements, then a new concept in the Maritimes. However the speaker who grabbed most attention was Gilbert Grosvenor and he hardly mentioned easements. Instead his subject was what he saw as the deterioration in the state of the Bras d'Or Lakes that had he had noted during his life time. Since many of those who attended had as requested, written their names and addresses in the book provided this list presented an opportunity to get in touch with a number of possible future members for our contemplated organization. On request the BLPF gave us this list and in January 1997 we circulated a letter with an enclosed questionnaire to all of these individuals. Question 6 of the questionnaire was "Would you come to an inaugural meeting of such Association?" A good number indicated they would.

By the end of that first gathering, among other things we had our present name, a date and place for an inaugural meeting. This was held in Baddeck on May 23 1997. By the end of the meeting the BSS had a board comprising Henry Fuller, Jim Crawford, Lloyd Stone, Simon Chiasson, Albert Marshall, Dan Christmas, Chair Pat Bates, Treasurer Henry Fuller, and Secretary Jim O'Brien. Later Rosemary Burns joined the Board and agreed to be vice Chair. There was unanimous agreement the Society should become an official body under the Nova Scotia's Joint Stock Company Act. This application signed by Pat Bates, Henry Fuller, Anna Steele, James Crawford, Lloyd Stone and Jim O'Brien was approved on August 11 1997 and the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society became a legal entity.

Those who attended that inaugural meeting were the above plus Julie Crawford, Jim Morrow, Richard Bergman, Chris King, Britt Roscoe, Charlie Restino, Susie Restino and the late Judy Wardwell. Interestingly the minutes of the meeting show that water quality, the subject that was to dominate BSS activities over the coming

decade was already on the agenda. Even if not yet quite up and running the BSS had at least taken a few first not so tentative steps.

During the following decade the Board of Directors has had roughly 100 regular board and 20 open annual meetings; one of the latter as required under the Joint Stock Company Act at the end of the financial year and the other in mid summer mainly for the convenience of non resident members. At a majority of these biannual meetings there was at least one speaker. Besides these a wide variety of individuals have made presentations to the Board at regular monthly meetings. For logistical reasons board meetings have usually been held in Baddeck (at the AGB) but have also at Johnstown, St Peter's, West Bay, Whycocomagh and the Coast Guard College. Despite distance and weather it has been a rare occasion when a Board meeting has lacked a quorum. One member, Tim Lambert, regularly commutes from Lower Ship Harbour on the Eastern Shore to attend meetings. Besides these BSS meetings, Pat Bates, Jim Crawford and others have represented the Society at meetings conferences and symposia across the country and Pat, to use his own word has 'crafted' innumerable letters to politicians, agencies, groups and other significant individuals.

Apart from attending symposia and conferences the BSS organized and ran a conference at the Gaelic College in October of 1999. It helped organize and run a Bras d'Or lakes '*consciousness raising*' concert in the Baddeck High School auditorium in 1998 at which many local musicians generously performed without charge. Through the Green Boat Challenge campaign run by Pat Bates with two students in the summer of 1991 the BSS provided the impetus for the later enactment legislation designating the Lakes a "No-discharge zone" to eliminate pollution from boat sewage.

Board members have endeavored to keep regular contact with the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife agency and in particular with its previous able head Charlie Dennis now Chief of the Eskasoni Band. In 1998 the BSS helped fund a group of five Dalhousie students to study and produce a paper 'Taking Care of the Bras d'Or'. Jamie Burke a student funded by the BSS spent a summer doing an inventory of new and planned dwellings in the watershed.

Following the massive wipe out oysters in the Lakes, government chose the BSS as the agency through which an oyster spat reseeding program with an assigned budget of \$ 250,000.00 was carried out. The actual reseeding program was carried out by oyster farmer Jim Crawford who, to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest, resigned from the board during this time. The work was completed on time under budget.

The Society pushed vigorously for a new sewage system (now in place) for Baddeck. The BSS has funded an annual scholarship/prize program for High School students for the past three years. Mainly due to the hard work of BSS treasurer Henry Fuller the Society has produced the biannual 'Blue Heron' newsletter for most of its

existence and also, largely due to his good work, the BSS has probably the best bank balance of any small voluntary society in Nova Scotia. When the first Bras d'Or Lakes coordinator (a position created largely a result of BSS pressure) Laurie Suitor was replaced after being caught in the cross fire of an internal NS civil service union dispute, the BSS provided \$5000 towards her salary so that she could complete her work on the sewage from boats issue.

These are but some of projects and activities in which the BSS has taken an active part however the most important function of the BSS has been, I believe, to heighten public and government awareness of the vulnerability of the Bras d'Or Lakes and the necessity of looking after their ecological welfare. This the Society has done in a number of ways including playing a major role in the creation of such groups as the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) the Collaborative Environmental Planning Initiative (CEPI) and Pitu'paq, by backing up other groups involved in Lake related activities and encouraging all levels of government including First Nations to work together for the benefit of the Lakes.

It would be inappropriate to pretend the BSS has only gone from success to success, the future of the Lakes is now secure and the BSS can metaphorically pack its bags and go home. This is simply not the case. There are still an alarming number of threats to the ecological future of the Bras d'Or Lakes that need to be addressed. These include the continuing existence of straight pipes (pumping sewage directly into Lakes), the absence of set back requirements for new shorefront homes, poor road construction methods, ballast water discharge (still happening despite promised legislation from Ottawa) etc. and perhaps most problematic of all the poor or sometimes total absence of liaison between the twenty plus governing agencies that have jurisdiction over Lakes.

The sad truth is there is still an enormous amount of work for the Bras d'Or Stewardship Society (and others) to do to "*Protect, Conserve and Restore the Bras d'Or Lakes*"; the only inland sea in North America, the jewel in the crown of Cape Breton's many natural assets.

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