

The original of the following was hand-written on Jan. 16th 2020

To: Iain Rankin, Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, Province of Nova Scotia

From: Martin Willison, retired professor of biology and environmental studies, Dalhousie University

Date: 16th January 2020

Dear Minister Rankin (Iain),

We have met but you probably don't remember me because you meet many people in the course of a busy job. I'm 76 years old and I live in the riding of your colleague, Brendan Maguire. Brendan and myself know each other well and have a constructive friendship. Brendan speaks highly of you.

I'm an immigrant to Canada having been born in the U.K. I arrived in Nova Scotia in 1974 and immediately loved the province and its people. I found people who were welcoming, open and generally without prejudice. The province's natural lands were an absolute delight, for reasons which I wish to explain.

For my first university degree, I attended St. Andrews University in Scotland. I studied botany and did well enough there to be invited to the University of Nottingham for a job and the opportunity to study for a Ph.D. degree. I guess you could say I was "head-hunted" for the job and the offer of a studentship was an added carrot. I did well enough in Nottingham to be invited to Dalhousie University as a Post-Doctoral Fellow and thence (again by invitation) to be a professor. My specialties are relatively broad and include plant physiology, conservation biology and environmental science. Recently I've dabbled in ecological engineering and have worked in China doing that.

When I lived in England I yearned to experience wild nature, unaffected by humans. Unfortunately, it doesn't exist there. I travelled in Europe and found little bits on alpine mountain tops, but failed to find extensive undisturbed forests, wetlands and other natural environments that I sought. In North America it is called "wilderness" and I wanted to know wilderness by experiencing it directly.

When I came to Nova Scotia at age 31, I again sought wilderness. Soon after arriving I took a tourist bus to Peggy's Cove. Tourists unloaded from the bus and headed for the cove, all except me that is. I took off for the barrens that I had seen through the window. I was spell-bound. I had found Mother Nature as she really is. Not the dune slacks of the Old Course in St. Andrews or the sheep-grazed hills of Perth (wonderful as these are) but Mother Nature's handwork.

If you have read this far you may now be able to guess the purpose of this letter. It is Owl's Head Provincial Park, which was administered as a park reserve for several decades. The Owl's Head barrens and the Peggy's Cove barrens are similar in some respects, but also different. The differences mostly arise from the terrain, one being founded on the granite of the South Mountain batholith, while the other is Meguma terrain within the Goldenville formation. Both have sparse vegetation, coarse rocky exposures, and permanently wet hollows.

I played golf as a boy from age 13. I picked it up again in St. Andrews for a year or so. I've played the Old, New, Jubilee and Eden courses in St. Andrews, each more than once, the Eden being my favourite. You might wonder how a young man from a modest home could have afforded this. After all, I could not have attended university

without a full scholarship. I didn't pay anything to play golf in St. Andrews. The 1960's were enlightened times in some ways and wealthier friends looked after those who were less well off, sometimes by innovative means.

Because I know a bit about golf, a bit about ecology, a bit about ecological engineering, and a bit about the history of biodiversity conservation in Nova Scotia, I feel confident that I can hold an informed opinion about the Owl's Head proposal. To be honest, the whole thing makes no sense at all.

The barrens at Owl's Head were identified many years ago as a significant ecological feature and landscape. The land has no significant forestry value (there are few trees having harvestable dimensions) and no significant mineral resource values that conflict with the ecological and biodiversity values that it holds. Under such circumstances there is little to threaten its status as a natural reserve and so there is relatively little pressure to ensure its protection by means of statute. It was not that this site was redundant within the parks and protected areas planning process but that it was judged secure due to the absence of competing interests. It was included within the 100 Wild Islands program of the Nova Scotia Nature Trust because it was a natural fit with their objectives having been identified as part of the longstanding Parks and Protected Areas Plan.

A private developer claims to wish to create golf courses at Owl's Head. This is a surprising claim given the land capability of the site. Due to absence of suitable soils at the site, the land capability is very poor for creating golf courses. A huge amount of engineering would be required and environmental damage to the site would be huge. The sensitive terrain and associated flora would be completely altered both by the construction of the courses and by their maintenance and use. Fertilizer run-off would be high in the cool moist conditions and so both upland and wetland aspects of the site would change, with wetlands becoming eutrophic. All the successful golf courses in Nova Scotia have been developed on lands having far greater natural capability than the lands at Owl's Head.

Jurisdictions and landscape architects in North America have begun to question some of the trends in golf course design. Too many courses have become too long and designed only for top-tier players. Too much damage has been done to natural sites. Too many courses have been developed far away from centres of population and therefore accessible only by elites. The sport has begun to lose contact with its roots, the roots that I knew as a student in Scotland where golf began. Nova Scotia needs to listen to those who understand roots.

For the reasons outlined above, I am distressed that your department (Natural Resources and Forestry) has made decisions to eliminate a natural resource of value to the people of this province and hand it over to foreign private interests who appear (on the surface at least) to have little understanding of the province's social values (such as public interest), geological history (hence land capability), and biodiversity conservation planning (the use of public lands as the core resource for biodiversity, and thus for life processes).

Sincerely,
Martin Willison

Ph.D., retired Full Professor Dalhousie University, one of the founders of the Science and Management of Protected Areas Association and the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, a concerned citizen of the Province of Nova Scotia.