

The environment: the high, high cost of doing nothing

Article and photos by Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux

Huck Finn and I shared the same dreams. Huck realized his dream in and around Hannibal, Missouri. I realized mine and grew into manhood in Dorchester, New Brunswick. Buck's Flats, Johnson's Mills, the Cherry Burton Road, the flat iron and the town square were playgrounds, and nature and her creatures my playmates.

The responsibilities of adulthood, parenting, meeting career goals and surviving life in the fast lane temporarily interrupted my relationship with Mother Nature. My maternal grandmother's infectious love of nature, however, prevailed and returning to the cherished days of my youth was simply a matter of time. Visits to local zoos, an occasional stroll down a paved, big city bike path, or arguing over sun bathing rights on an overpopulated freshwater beach did not fulfill my need.

The Maritimes, my home, was beckoning and I needed to return to the region where breathing deeply was healthy, drinking from a babbling brook was a way of life and "PCB" in the swimming hole stood for Pretty Cute Blonde, not some cancer causing chemical.

Home, as I recalled it, was a place where we ate shad, tuna, haddock and halibut and my day at the beach was shared with feisty sea gulls, not thousands of human ants. As retirement beckoned, I enthusiastically packed my camera gear and headed for an extended stay in the woods, along the beaches and in the salt marshes of the Tantramar and Beaubassin eco-systems of Fundy's tidal shore.

The scent of the sea was magnetic. My anticipation mounted as I navigated each bend in the road that brought me closer and closer to l'Acadie and the Acadian paradise I had left years before.

My naiveté and belief that time had stood still, quickly faded as I ran the gauntlet between Riviere du Loup and Edmonston where even money says you

will hit a moose before you make it through. The revitalized Trans Canada Highway, as I would soon learn, was leading me into paradise lost – not the Shangri-La of my youth.

"My God what had happened to the home I once knew?"



Pulp plants along the St. John River had poisoned this magnificent estuary. The Miramichi was no longer the pride of salmon rivers, the Restigouche and Madapedia rivers are fading memories of great salmon and trout runs and the tidal bore needs a push to make it up the dammed Petitcodiac.

Voracious clear-cutters are systematically violating every virgin timber-stand in the province. Foreign interests are making it worthwhile to deplete our fishing resources; greed has dried-up our cod, shad no longer populate the Bay of Fundy, halibut and haddock stocks are waning.

Our beloved lobster is threatened. Contaminated shell fish warnings dominate our sea coasts and most of our oysters have a government mandated 30-day decontamination "clean-up" process they must meet before they are deemed edible. We sell our mercury laced tuna to the Japanese and Americans, only to buy it back, still polluted but in processed form, neatly wrapped in cute lunch packs, which we feed to our school age children.

We have mastered the art of "roe-ing" the very future out of our herring schools. We squeeze their eggs into instant-freeze packs and send them off to the lucrative Asian market. We then quietly smoke and salt their shriveled lifeless remains and send them off to Haiti and the Dominican Republic – making us good stewards of a dying industry. What cannot be smoked we sell to fish-processors who give us back fertilizer for our gardens.

We allow local and provincial governments to

indiscriminately develop our coastlines while destroying their sensitive eco-systems. At the same time, we systematically dismantle funding resources for important environmental protection programs.

Why does it appear that Mother Nature finds herself in a constant battle with local politicians? Why is it that only a few of us are willing to reach out and take her by the hand and extricate her from the brink of ecological annihilation?

When I committed to conservation through photo-journalism seven years ago, I left behind a 23-year career in professional sports and a subsequent 12-year stint as a political lobbyist in the United States. Apparently my dream of becoming a retired, laidback easy-going photographer is rapidly coming to a close. I had expected to create a homestead on the shores of Northumberland Strait at Cap Brule for my grandchildren with the hope that they would experience the same joys there that I had in Dorchester. Unfortunately, that may not happen – if I do not get involved in the conservation and preservation challenges we are faced with here at home.

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Over time I hope you enjoy our walk through nature and the insights I have to offer. My wish is for you and me to work together to effect an integral change in how we go about conserving and preserving our environments for future generations.

The subject matter available is unlimited, from secretive, highly volatile coal shipments entering Energy New Brunswick's Belledune, Noranda docks to the continued funding of ineffective federal and provincial environmental protection programs that don't work. I look forward to drawing you out of your comfort zone with thought provoking insights that will require you to act. No fence sitters allowed.

I'd like to invite you to walk with me through the devastated wastelands left by clear-cutters acting with impunity or serious government oversight. Let me introduce you to the defining principal of big business and government "wink and a nod" programs called the principle of creative ambiguity.

Sit with me on the shores of Northumberland Strait and watch polluters continue their indiscriminate dumping of untreated waste into our oceans, onto our beaches and into our streams and rivers. I'd like to have you join me in a meal of once contaminated oysters. (Thirty days in a bath and rinse



Five years ago, when I returned to the shores of Shepody Bay, my childhood playground, I cringed. The magnificent aerial displays of the million or so migrating semipalmated sandpipers that congregate there every July and August were gone. That number had dwindled to a quarter-million.

However, on the bluff overlooking Johnson's Cove I had a providential and enlightening encounter with a diminutive leprechaun from the offices of Environment Canada's Wildlife Services bureau in Sackville ... Peter Hicklin was conducting his annual semipalmated sandpiper research along the shores of Buck's Flats, Johnson's Mills and the



program makes them eligible for you and me to consume.)

Let me show you why enforcement of environment and wildlife protection laws is virtually impossible within the bureaucratic labyrinth. Let's look into our local lobster industry and examine why it is in dire straits. There may be enough truth and consequences lurking under the Confederation Bridge to explain the problem. But, who's holding back on the available data? Fishermen or the government?

One of my favorite boondoggles is the governments funding and staffing of programs intended to

beaches I had patrolled as a boy. Being the opportunist I am, I moved alongside Hicklin and began listening for his impromptu comments....

"I like that one," he'd utter, to no one in particular. I quickly realized that "I like that one," was a Hicklinism that meant "Take a picture, you fool! The aerial acrobatics provided by these feathered wonders was nothing less than special. To quote Hicklin, a veteran of twenty-five (25) years of researching these birds, "This is the perfect day!"

Hicklin and I have spent countless hours discussing the future of shorebirds migrating through Atlantic Canada and the stories are almost always the same we, the private sector, must extend our helping hands to Mother Nature before it is too late!

The building of the causeway/dam in Riverview has deprived the regions around Dorchester Cape, Buck's Flats, Johnson's Mills, Daniel Flats and Mary's Point of the abundant food reserves available, in the past, to the millions of migrating semipalmated sandpipers. Instead of a rich fertile feeding ground for migrating shorebirds the region is becoming a vast burial ground for the lipid rich mud shrimp (Corophium) living there in the chocolate colored sub-straits.

Since the process of flushing the lake behind the dam began, worthless silt has accumulated on the feeding grounds, denying the birds access to the reserves needed to affect their lengthy 4,000km, non-stop flight to their South American wintering grounds.

A million or so 45 years ago...75,000 in 2004.

Sadder still is the knowledge that New Brunswick hosts 35 species of migrating shorebirds on their way to and from their Arctic breeding grounds each year. Of the 35 species re-fueling on our shores, 28 are in decline, 13 are in significant decline and three are on the "species-at-risk" list.

A recent scientific study revealed that the once abundant Red Knot will be extinct by the year 2010. The Red Knot has become a victim of uncontrolled over harvesting of the horseshoe crab in the Delaware Bay, off Cape May, New Jersey.

Members of Environment Canada's Wildlife Services departments have allowed me to listen, learn and respond to nature's call for help. As a result of their generous efforts I have been able to capture and share thousands of educational images that help educate the public to some of the pressing problems before us.

– Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux



The once abundant Red Knot will be extinct by the year 2010.

protect our "species-at-risk." Not only are they ineffective and failed, they may be wrought with more sinister undertones.

I have just begun! The environment and its salvation for my grandchildren are more important to me than anything I can imagine. Accountability standards must be raised and tax funded programs and recipients must be held accountable. Politicians need to take a stand, professional staff must step up, step out and be counted.

I am reminded of the days when coal miners, deep in the mine, hung a canary in a cage. As long as

the canary sang all was well. The moment the singing stopped or the bird died everyone bailed out... they were next to go.

Welcome to this man's call-to-action. The "fat lady" may still be singing ... but the environmental canary may be wailing its final song. Together we can make a difference for my grandchildren, and yours.

... Please!

This is the first in a series of eco-articles by Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux