

Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Candidate Wilderness Area

November 2008

Public Consultation Summary

Overview

In October 2007, the province announced its intent to designate Crown lands of the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes area in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) under the Wilderness Areas Protection Act. The 1,350 hectare (3,350 acre) candidate wilderness area includes forests, lakes, barrens, and wetlands. The wilderness area will protect valued wildlife habitat and a range of wilderness recreation opportunities, all within minutes of Atlantic Canada's largest urban centre.

This summer we asked you to tell us what you think of the proposal. Comments received during this consultation are a key component of the final decision making process and provide an opportunity to identify and resolve any unforeseen issues prior to designation.

To ensure that everyone could share their views and opinions, a discussion newsletter was released on June 18 2008 . The newsletter provided background information and highlighted key discussion topics to help generate feedback. Nova Scotia Environment also held public information meetings in Halifax on July 2 and in Upper Tantallon on July 7. These sessions included a brief presentation and a series of discussion tables focussing on key topics. Stakeholder groups were invited to meet directly with staff to share information or discuss specific concerns throughout the consultation period, which concluded on August 22.

As part of the designation process, a socioeconomic analysis of the impact of designating the area is currently being prepared for Nova Scotia Environment by the consulting firm Jacques Whitford Limited. This study will be released for public comment prior to designation.

How You Participated

In total, 165 submissions were received during the consultation period. Many of the submissions provided detailed comments on a range of issues. Of these submissions, 98 explicitly supported designation of Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area, and none opposed designation, or raised issues that cannot be addressed. Most of the comments were received by mail, fax, and email. Approximately 30 people attended each of the public meetings.



For more information on Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Candidate Wilderness Area please contact:

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What You Said

Boundary

The majority of respondents support designating the wilderness area, and many expressed interest in expanding the area in the near future. Most of the discussion on boundary extensions encouraged the province to support Halifax Regional Municipality's (HRM) goal outlined in its Regional Plan, of establishing a regional park in this area. The regional park is to include some adjacent private lands, such as around Birch Cove Lakes (Susie's, Quarry, and Fox Lakes). There is strong interest in protecting this area for its conservation and recreation values.

Many see future HRM regional park lands providing access and recreation amenities for the wilderness area. There is also concern that potential commercial and residential development on these private lands around Birch Cove Lakes could impact canoe routes and other recreation values. Some suggested that adjacent development could cause ecological impact inside the wilderness area.

Respondents also questioned the exclusion of Crown lands north of the proposed Highway 113 corridor. While most comments on this topic were directly related to objections to the highway proposal, many felt the lands should be designated regardless of highway development. The primary values cited for these areas are the inclusion of shoreline along Maple Lake, potentially old and unique red spruce forests, wildlife movement corridors, and increased habitat protection.

Some respondents encouraged the acquisition of certain private land parcels along the northern boundary of the candidate wilderness area. There was also interest in acquiring the private land adjacent to the wilderness area along Fraser Lake.

Special Values and Features

Many respondents described special features of the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes area which they value. Many comments highlighted biodiversity values, describing the area as a refuge for plant species and wildlife in a rapidly urbanizing landscape. Some mentioned rare or uncommon species such as Uhler's sundragon, the mountain sandwort, mainland moose, and common nighthawk, which have been found in the area. The value of old forest, wetlands, and interconnected lakes as wildlife habitat was also mentioned.

Many people referred to wilderness recreation opportunities. Respondents highlighted the canoe route through the lakes of the area, the trails at Charlie's Lake, and the potential to develop further trails and access points. Some expressed concern that too much recreation development (e.g. parking lots, board walks, bridges, and signs) could harm the area and detract from a wilderness experience. Many others acknowledged that the near urban location may warrant considerable trail and related amenities.

Use of the Wilderness Area

Many respondents described how they currently use the area. The most common activities are canoeing, hiking, mountain biking, and swimming. Winter activities such as cross country skiing, skating, and snowshoeing were also discussed. Secondary activities were bird watching, plant viewing and identification, fishing, camping, and exploration. Many people also described experiences of simply resting or contemplating in the quietness and solitude of the area.

Some respondents encouraged partnerships with HRM, local recreation groups, conservation groups, and adjacent landowners to develop wilderness recreation opportunities. A few suggested that such partnerships could be used to form a community group that would oversee the management and protection of the area over the long term.

A number of respondents expressed concern that the wilderness area designation will not prohibit hunting and trapping activities. While some recognized that these activities have a place in other wilderness areas, the close proximity to the city and the expected level of use for wilderness recreation, was seen to make these activities inappropriate in this area. Some asked about the potential for mountain bike use in the area, and highlighted currently used trails. No-one spoke of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use in the area which is very limited.

Socio-Economic Values

A number of people commented on the socio-economic benefits of designating the wilderness area. The most commonly cited benefits were tourism values; some described the area as a potential tourism icon.

Many also highlighted health and quality of life benefits of ecosystem services like water purification and air quality, and experiential benefits such as aesthetics, spiritual values, recreation, and existence values.

Some people discussed the designation of this area as it relates to municipal planning issues, citing it as a green belt preventing impacts related to urban sprawl. Those interested in further urban development on surrounding private land also see the wilderness area as an asset for the region.

Education and research were also described as primary benefits, because the area's proximity to schools provides an ideal opportunity for field trips and research studies.

Very little comment was received on the potential socio-economic impacts of lost resource potential in the area. Some concerns were expressed over lost aggregate and building stone extraction opportunities, but it was generally acknowledged that this designation poses a relatively small impact on provincial mining opportunities.



Access

Many identified the need for better access to the wilderness area. Most noted was the lack of existing, safe and legal access to the area's canoeing opportunities. Two access points to Susie's Lake were described. Both require crossing private land to reach the lake, and one of these has unsafe parking on the shoulder of the Bicentennial Highway.

A number of the comments suggested possible locations for more suitable and formal access to the area. Many favoured making access points where they can be reached by public transit and by bicycle path. Respondents also supported the development of a hiking trail network in the wilderness area. It was suggested that these trails connect to the existing trails to Charlie's Lake, beginning at the Maskwa Aquatic Club, and to Blue Mountain.

Proposed Highway 113

Some respondents used this consultation to express their concern about the proposed development of Highway 113. They felt the proposed highway would impact on the peacefulness of the area and habitat connectivity.

One respondent stated support for the highway, indicating its value in reducing traffic congestion and its potential to create good access to the wilderness area. Others, while not directly supporting the highway, suggest that, if built, it should include an access point at Blue Mountain Hill and an active transportation route along the side of the proposed highway that provides for bicycle use.

Next Steps

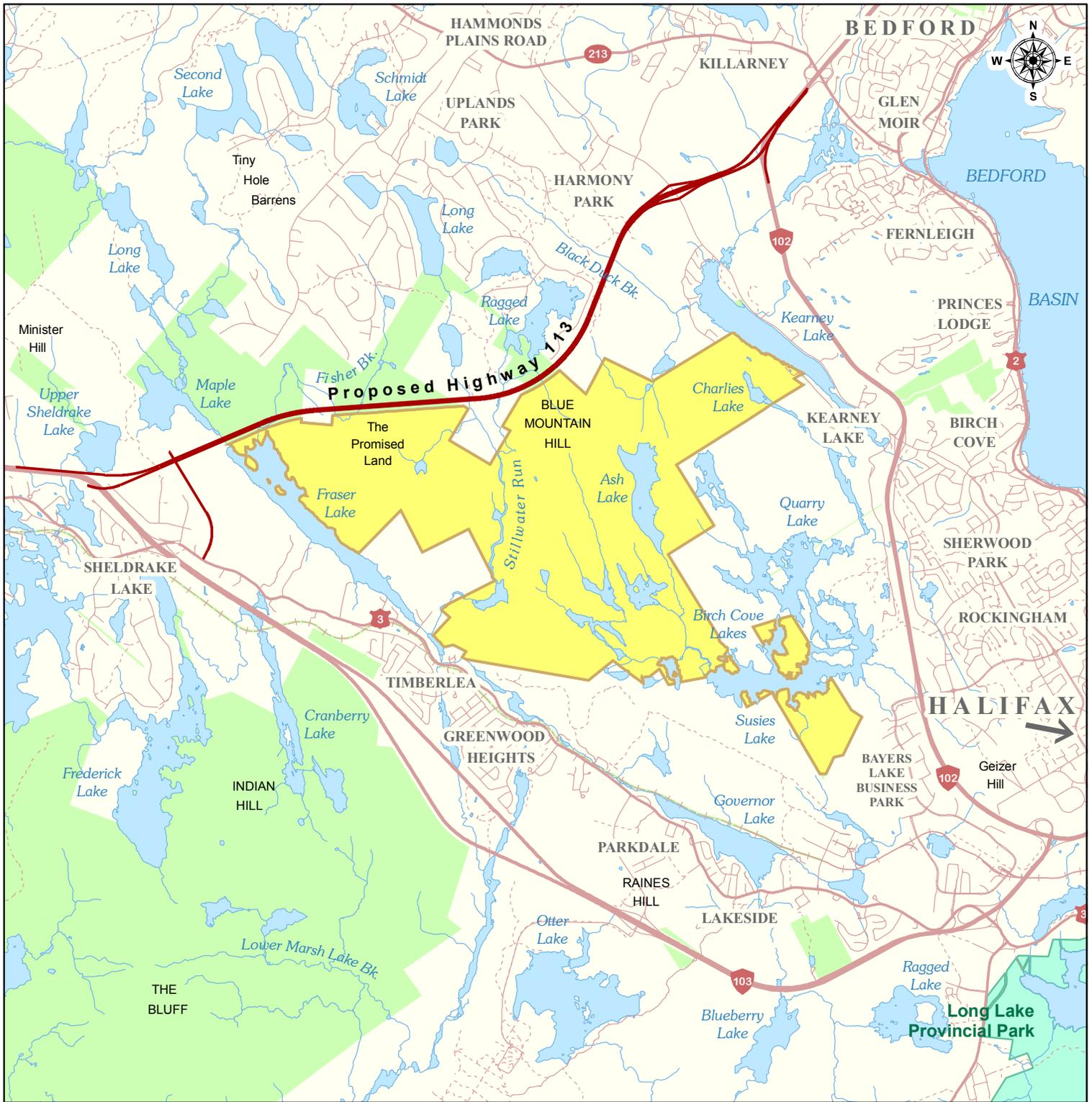
The province is currently consulting with the Mi'kmaq with respect to the proposed designation. In making decisions about the designation, government will consider a range of factors, including public comment, Mi'kmaq interests, and the socioeconomic analysis.

Once all consultation is complete, the Minister of Environment will bring forward a recommendation, for approval of the Governor in Council, considering the designation of this area under the *Wilderness Areas Protection Act*.

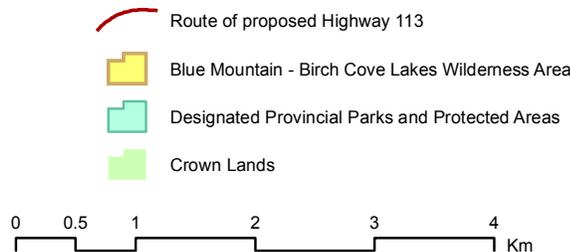
Information Sharing

We thank all those who provided comment during the public consultation process. A full set of submissions received during the comment period is available for viewing at the Nova Scotia Environment office in Halifax (5151 Terminal Road).

Nova Scotia Environment considers participant identity as personal information, in keeping with the provisions of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. The privacy of a participant's identity will be protected by the department, unless the participant consents to the release, or if the submission has been made public by the participant. Any person or group may give prior consent, in writing, to the release of their submission.



Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area Proposed Boundary



Cartography by NS Environment, June, 2008.
<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nse/protectedareas/>

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