

In Defence of Home Places

Environmental Activism in Nova Scotia

MARK R. LEEMING

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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Introduction

*I*N *DEFENCE OF HOME PLACES* traces the origins and development of environmental activism in Nova Scotia from the 1960s through the 1980s. At the core, it is about the recognition and consequences of ideological differences within the environmental movement of a modern country. This book considers three major controversies that shaped the environmental movement through the late 1980s and into the present day: nuclear power, chemical forestry, and uranium mining. Time and again, environmental activists confronting these issues struggled to negotiate differences of opinion on the basic questions of environmentalism: the causes of environmental problems, the proper relationship of humanity to the non-human world, and the actions most likely to achieve that relationship. By 1985, Nova Scotian environmentalists riven by these differences had divided their movement into mainstream and fringe environmentalisms, with quite different answers to the major questions before them.

Nova Scotian environmental activists mirrored their counterparts in other modern societies in disagreeing fundamentally over the basic structures of those societies. “Ecological modernists” believed that (most) environmental problems were unintended and technologically remediable side-effects of otherwise desirable industrial processes, and were inclined to address them through collaboration with the state and industry. They did not question modern society’s commitment to its fundamental principles, including large-scale industry, economic growth, and the acceptance of science as the sole legitimate form of knowledge. “Non-modernists,” meanwhile, viewed environmental problems as the necessary and evil

consequences of these same commitments. They favoured radical changes in economy and society. Recognizing that neither the state nor industry would willingly subvert the modernist project, they pursued the politics of confrontation rather than consultation. While these groups cooperated often in the early days of activism, by 1985 the ecological modernists had drifted into a position in which they found further cooperation difficult and occasionally impossible.

Thus the history of Nova Scotian environmental activism speaks also to the definition of environmentalism everywhere. One group of researchers has long favoured an exclusive definition, insisting for more than three decades that the “lifestyle” environmentalism of the affluent world in the 1960s – characterized by the pursuit of clean air, clean water, and outdoor recreation as luxury commodities – is a qualitatively new development in the social history of the Western world, uniquely deserving of the label “environmentalism.” It is, they say, a product of demographic and economic changes following the Second World War, set apart from contemporary and antecedent movements by its proponents’ unprecedented wealth and comfort; this they call “postmaterialism.”¹ Others favour a more inclusive definition, ranking such lifestyle environmentalism alongside prior anti-industrial movements and contemporary environment-themed activism in the less wealthy world, all of them motivated by reactions against the undesirable effects of industry, capitalism, and the dominance of scientific thinking, which impose an unfavourable monetary “discount rate” on the sacred sites, home places, and other economically incommensurable values held by poorer people.² This book falls into the latter camp.

Non-modern argument was rarely articulated in theoretical terms, and not until the end of the 1970s, partly in reaction to the consolidation of an ecomodernist mainstream, but to recognize its presence at the heart of environmental activism is to acknowledge that all environmentalism is born of a reaction to late modernity, and the “political, social, and scientific consensus that has dominated the last two or three hundred years of public life.” Broadly, modernity is associated with the three key tenets already mentioned, plus a progressive theory of history, nation-state polity, increased use of inanimate energy sources, and a social and intellectual “system of objectification” by which uniquely local or personal forms of knowledge are replaced by a more legitimate universal way of thinking and speaking.³ Ecomodernist reformers operated within the modernist project; non-modern radicals generally contested it, in diverse and inconsistent fashion. Both responded to its ecological impact.

The commitments of both sorts of environmentalists rested on personal and emotional foundations. Personal vulnerability motivated *all* environmental activism. It most often found expression in defence of economic and affective ties to local places, as the intrusion of new industrial developments into rural settings spawned reaction. Individual and collective protests focused on the degradation of known and familiar villages, coves, hamlets, and landscapes, rather than on some distant prospect or “the environment” in the abstract. Some local activists eventually embraced global perspectives, but rarely at the cost of their personal and local attachments. Only a handful of modernist activists who found it politically inexpedient to acknowledge local and individual experience (an illegitimate source of knowledge, in the modernist world view) truly abandoned the defence of home places as a central point of reference for their actions. In sum, the idea of and attachment to home place here outweighed (though they never completely displaced) network formation, resource distribution, class, race, and gender as the driving forces of environmental action.

For all that individual world views mattered, Canadian political culture also shaped environmentalism in Nova Scotia in the 1970s and 1980s. Government influence, both federal and provincial, helped to drive modernist activists towards conciliatory politics, and by unwitting extension helped to solidify the radical critique. In doing so, it also reduced the political impact of the two strands of activism, which often achieved real political influence when working in combination. In the end, this is the story of several groups of agents – governmental factions, activist groups, and various industrialists – negotiating the politics of social movements with varying levels of success.

Environmentalists in Nova Scotia participated in a national and international political conversation about particular environmental hazards. The issues in question in Nova Scotia – especially nuclear power, chemical forestry, and uranium mining – were subjects of major controversy across the country and around the world, where others took careful note of events in the province and attempted to intervene in Nova Scotia to the advantage of whatever party they represented in Ottawa, Washington, Stockholm, or other locales.⁴ Nova Scotians joined federal non-governmental groups such as the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility (CCNR) and Friends of the Earth Canada (FOE), and they participated in consultative groups, including the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council (CEAC) and Canadian Environmental Network (CEN). But the substance of the national story, the real action, took place within provincial, not federal,

arenas. The story of environmentalism in Nova Scotia is thus a particularly clear window into the story of the movement in Canada.

This study highlights the salience of activity at the provincial level in Canadian environmentalism, and illuminates how activism operated on the ground by attending to the intragovernmental squabbles, the industry/government collusion, the small rural activist groups' interaction with their better-funded urban peers, the cooperation between First Nations activists and other environmentalists, and the collaborations with peace activists, conservationists, and various social justice advocates that shaped events. There is a tendency in national studies to focus on the major players, such as Greenpeace or Pollution Probe, or on the federal and provincial government agencies established in the 1970s to deal with environmental problems, but while these make important contributions to the story of environmentalism in Canada, relationships within provinces best define it. The environmental movement, in Nova Scotia and in most parts of Canada and the world, has been firmly rooted in, and found its motive force at, the local level. Relationships between larger mainstream groups and governments were shaped in large part by the smaller, usually rural groups whose stubborn defence of their home places led them to reject (at least in part) the conclusions that the other two offered about the causes of environmental problems, the role of humanity in nature, and the role of environmentalists in the political process.⁵

That there ever was a national Canadian environmental movement at all is a matter of some debate. Whereas groups across Canada often shared common challenges and opportunities through the constitutional division of powers that gave the provinces jurisdiction over natural resources, there was very little formal cooperation at the federal level among Canadian environmental activists until the late 1970s, and even that seemed often tangential to the most vital emerging concerns of provincial and local movements. There was simply far more coalition, cooperation, and common concern among groups within single provinces. For these reasons, this book speaks of a Canadian environmentalism made up of provincial movements rather than a single Canadian environmental movement, an important distinction.

Far from the simple leisure pursuit of an affluent urban society, environmentalism appears a far more complex social phenomenon in its Nova Scotian iteration. It was a reaction to the ecological impacts of federal/provincial development schemes designed to alleviate regional economic disparity, and it frequently reshaped those plans when they conflicted with small communities' visions of a viable, desirable, and just economic future.

Environmentalism arose in Nova Scotia in response to an unusual conglomeration of environmental events of national and international significance but crucially local impact. In little more than a decade after 1970, the province witnessed Canada's largest marine oil spill, an attempt to organize a regional nuclear-powered electrical utility, the improbable defeat of a Swedish multinational's plan to spray insecticides on Cape Breton Island, an internationally infamous provincial Supreme Court ruling on herbicides, moves by a French company to begin uranium mining in the midst of agricultural settlement, and the beginning of a decades-long fight to clean up the Sydney tar ponds, legacy of the Sydney steel mills and still the most toxic site in the country. Throughout this book, there appear men and women like Murray Prest, a Halifax County mill owner and bitter opponent of large-scale industrial forestry. Prest's economic self-interest in preserving a smaller-scale sawn-lumber industry and his ecological arguments against clearcut chemical forestry seem at first to invite a distinction between values and interests, but his position actually expresses a commitment to a non-modern way of life in which the continuity and meaning of the human (and economic) community depended on a relationship with the forest in which small trees were left for later generations of woods workers, and the forest cover was left intact to preserve the various ecological amenities (food, clean water, and so on) that the community required. Prest was not concerned with the philosophical coherence of his position or with acquiring a label for it; he accepted capitalism, for example, but rejected large-scale industry, political and economic centralization, and the total commodification of the forest. This book is the story of men and women like Prest – diverse in their dissent, united in their defence of home places.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Tracing the origins of environmental awareness in Nova Scotia, Chapter 1, "At Home and Abroad," recounts a diverse set of relatively minor controversies before the early 1970s. From Boat Harbour to Mahone Bay to Chedabucto Bay, these early struggles established the lasting pattern of environmental activism in Nova Scotia as a movement primarily motivated by rural communities' reactions to the negative consequences of industrial modernity: the pollution, the centralization of power in the city, the increasing exploitation of the hinterland, and the threatened destruction of traditional economies. These initial actions make it clear that early environmental

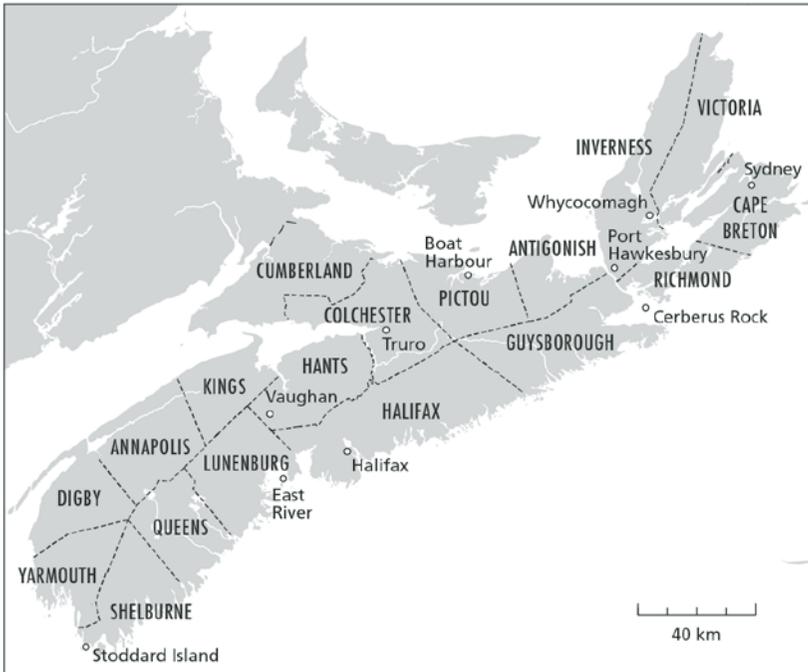


FIGURE 1 Map of Nova Scotian counties and relevant sites. *Cartography by Eric Leinberger*

activists in the province held well-developed and diverse opinions on the nature of their movement. Some were the intellectual brothers of the technocratic nineteenth-century conservation movement, others were radically suspicious of government motives. They were a diverse group of people, with starkly different economic and geographic origins, as demonstrated by the map of relevant sites in Figure 1; their number included fishermen, trappers, medical doctors, Mi'kmaq band chiefs, farmers, students, and more. All were aware of the currents of popular ecology in the world at large. Government attempts to manage political radicalism, not limited to environmentalism, helped to create environmental activist organizations such as the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) in Halifax. These groups showed a generalized concern for “the environment” and an early tendency to focus on public education rather than on political pressure. Meanwhile, outside of the city, activists grew increasingly effective at challenging and changing the course of development policies that drew new industrial projects into their communities. By the end of the 1960s, they were mustering scientific

arguments to shape public opposition to destructive industries, eventually prompting the government in Halifax to issue its own regulations in an attempt to blunt the critique. In the early 1970s, the rural movement's growing political power culminated in the ignominious defeat of a federal/provincial plan to create a new national park on the province's eastern shore, and as links among activists of all types and locations grew stronger, they began to take up more ambitious causes.

Chapter 2, "The Two MECs," tracks the development of anti-nuclear activism from 1972 through to the provincial government's decision in 1980 to abandon plans for a single Maritime electric utility. Beginning with a plan to build a large nuclear power plant on the south shore to generate electricity for export to the United States, the narrative tracks a series of external factors responsible for seismic changes in the Nova Scotian movement: the oil price shocks of the early 1970s that ignited debate about the need for nuclear generation in the Maritimes, the limits to growth theory that widely popularized the notion in 1972 that economic growth could not continue forever on a finite planet, and the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster in 1979, which revitalized anti-nuclear politics across many jurisdictions, including the Maritimes. This chapter points to the importance of political jurisdiction in shaping Canadian environmentalism, as the attempt to unite the energy agencies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island produced an activist backlash that strengthened and drew together the movements in all three provinces but collapsed with the end of the regional utilities unification plan. In Nova Scotia, organization against nuclear energy brought the first long-lasting and multi-issue activist groups to wide public notice. It also led many activists to realize the possibility of making their appeals directly to government, remaining within the parameters of the existing modernist energy policy rather than continuing on a course of total rejection of large industrial electricity generation. A politically conservative (though still strongly reformist) group of religious peace activists who eventually formed the energy committee of the Halifax-based Ecology Action Centre were crucial and early actors in this shift towards modernism and government consultation, and remained central figures in the movement for many years thereafter. The sense of personal vulnerability of farming and fishing communities remained a key motivating factor and sustained the defence of home places as a theme in environmental argument, but it was joined by the less geographically fixed contributions of immigrant American Quakers. Another central theme of this and subsequent chapters, mistrust of the very secretive provincial government, was a source of disagreement between the more urban

ecomodernist activists and their rural peers. Nevertheless, both remained committed to a vision of the movement as a grassroots coalition of local groups with a common, province-wide purpose, so far as anti-nuclear activism was concerned; in neither the nascent ecomodernist mainstream nor the non-modernist groups was the notoriously self-centred NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) activist ever to be found.

In Chapter 3, “Power from the People,” the focus shifts to a hard-fought battle over the use of chemical pesticides in forestry, beginning in 1976 with a famous (and successful) campaign to keep Nova Scotia from following New Brunswick’s lead in spraying insecticides from the air in a futile bid to reduce the numbers of spruce budworm on Cape Breton Island. The events recounted in this chapter demonstrate the growing determination of government and industry to resist environmentalist pressure, and the equally strong determination of some activists to change the minds of their opponents in the bureaucracy without resorting to radical tactics or rhetoric. The collision of the two played out in the infamous (and unsuccessful) herbicide trial of 1983, with which the chapter ends. The importance of global trends is central to the narrative of this chapter, with both environmentalists and the forest industry reaching beyond the province’s borders for resources in their conflict, as well as for new arenas in which to make use of their respective gains within the province. But the limits of international assistance are fully on display as well in the second half of the chapter, as international connections help the more modernist activists pursue their case in court, where non-modern arguments carried no weight. Several secondary themes rise to prominence here, such as the agency of the news media, the internal politics of the provincial bureaucracy (and its commitment to the preservation of its own power), the continuing vitality of the resource conservation movement, and the rhetorical power of jobs and immigration status to both the advantage and the detriment of activists.

From the air above to the stones below, Chapter 4, “Two Environmentalisms,” examines a comparatively brief but intense campaign from 1981 to 1985 aimed at preventing uranium mining in the province. Most of the action discussed in this chapter occurred in and around the hearings of the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Uranium Mining, during which activists finally acknowledged the full extent of their differences. This is a story of fragmentation – and the fracture in the movement was bitter – but the campaign to halt uranium mining was a surprising success, owing in large part to the persistence of the radicals, who continued fighting desperately to defend their homes. Links with peace and conservation groups

are once again on display, along with the urban activists' greater tendency towards modernism and the global links of every set of actors. Among the central themes, the influence (and rejection) of metropolitanism ranks high as a factor in Canadian environmentalism, brought into focus by the vitality of rural activism in the Nova Scotian movement. Indeed, Canadian environmentalism as seen through the prism of the province's experience appears inextricably bound up with the discontents of metropolitanism, between regions of the country as well as between rural and urban locales within provinces. So, too, do the results of the activist schism reflect a national reality: the increased articulation and political consciousness of radical environmental critique, and the growing commitment of the ecomodernist mainstream to consultative processes. Government action around uranium mining in Nova Scotia also illustrates the extent to which judicial and quasi-judicial forms – courts and commissions – serve to reinforce the modernist mode of thought, as well as the extent to which pressure politics continued to win results.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Watermelons and Market Greens,” offers a short overview of some major environmental controversies of the 1980s and demonstrates the persistence of the fissure in the province's environmental movement. Important to note is the ability of radical and mainstream activists to cooperate despite their differences, when involved in such issues as the threatened demolition of Kelly's Mountain for a granite quarry. Local grievance and defence of home places still drove environmental activism in the 1980s, as it does today, and the provincial and federal governments still encouraged ecomodernist positions. The provincial movement, however, settled into a new pattern in the 1980s, with radicalism centred geographically on the north and south shores and on Cape Breton Island, and with modernist environmentalism predominant in the city of Halifax and the central mainland.

The process by which the ill-defined activism of the late 1960s became the theoretically and politically articulate alternative environmentalisms of the 1980s, the narrative contained in these chapters, is not a decline-and-fall story. It is a story of intellectual growth and differentiation in a diverse movement. Environmental activists did err at times in pursuing modernist policies too stridently, but they also demonstrated the power of both strands of the movement to effect change in development policy by working, if not in close collaboration, at least on parallel tracks. If there is a lesson to be taken from these pages, it is not that environmentalism in Nova Scotia failed, but that it has always contained the elements of success, and at times has even managed to make them work.