



S. Nunn photo

A History of Protecting Sandy Lake

2025

This paper can not possibly include every example of what anyone has ever done for the Sandy Lake area. It is hoped that it gives perspective on the size of the investment in the Sandy Lake watershed over the decades in terms of time, funds, and effort by individuals and organizations along with substantial Federal, Provincial, and Municipal investments.

Citizens have looked out for Sandy Lake, Bedford, for a very long time. Residents tell of “Uncle Mel” who was a school principal by occupation, Acadia University graduate, President of Nova Scotia’s SPCA, and who was also known affectionately as “The Mayor of Sandy Lake”. In the 1970s, after about two decades of his efforts, he sat his son down to say he was passing the responsibility over to the son. What followed were 35 years of similar efforts by the son and other community members through a series of local organizations which are outlined in this document.

Near the end of Uncle Mel’s tenure, in 1971, a report by Paul Dean, Wildlife Biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service entitled ‘Natural Environment Survey’ identified seven sites called “Jewels in the Crown” in the greater Halifax/Dartmouth area of regional significance for recreation and environmental protection. (1)

Shortly thereafter, a second background study was prepared for the Metropolitan Area Planning Committee (MAPC). Entitled “Growth Through Recreation,” this study estimated the amount of land required to create seven regional parks in the areas identified in the Dean Report. (2) A draft regional development plan was released in 1973, and it included the proposed regional parks system.

On the basis of these studies, seven Regional Parks were designated in the Halifax-Dartmouth Regional Development Plan of 1975, to satisfy the stated objective: “to protect areas of unique natural significance against adverse effects and to reserve sufficient open space for recreational purposes”. They were the Shubenacadie Canal, Hemlock Ravine, Long Lake, McNabs Island, Admirals Cove, the Cole Harbour Salt Marshes, and Sandy Lake/Sackville River. Each location was seen as unique from the others and outstanding in its own right. The Sandy Lake to the Sackville River proposal was referred to as the Sandy Lake Regional Park (there has been some confusion over the years because at least five different names were used to identify the Sandy Lake Regional Park area).

In 1976, MAPC approved the establishment of a Parks Advisory Group to carry out planning studies on the Regional Parks. The Parks Advisory Committee came back in 1979 with a full report describing each park, with references to bio-physical data, proposed development concepts, projected development and acquisition costs, boundary recommendations, and ownership details. A key conclusion of the report was for immediate acquisition of key privately held land parcels, as such lands could be lost to development. (3)

When Sandy Lake was in the County of Halifax (and not part of Bedford), the process for the Sandy Lake Regional Park lands to be designated as a Regional Park required that Halifax County, the City of Dartmouth and the City Halifax all agree on the designation. There was excitement among the local community for the park creation. A local resident offered to give ~500 acres at the west end of Sandy Lake to the Municipality of Halifax County for the Sandy Lake Regional Park, on condition that the park be named after her deceased husband. At the same time, the county warden was looking to increase tax income, and Twin Cities Dairy (renamed Farmers Dairy and currently Agropur Cooperative Dairy) was looking for a site to relocate their dairy outside the city proper. The dairy noticed that a large property along the southwestern shore of Sandy Lake which suited their needs (proximity to the city plus lake water) came up for sale. The county warden chose to approve the Dairy to increase county taxes and vetoed the land gift for the regional park.

The lake was muddy for at least 2 years after the dairy road was built. The Sandy Lake Ratepayers Association brought in biologists to reveal the need to find an alternative to the plan to dump dairy processing effluent into the lake. Consequently, the dairy built treatment ponds that still treat the effluent today, and it was connected to the city’s water and sewage treatment systems.

Despite the move toward industrializing lands around Sandy Lake, community efforts to create the Sandy Lake Regional Park carried on. The environmental impact of the dairy’s location so close to the lake was such a shock that the Sandy Lake Ratepayers Association (including the son of Uncle Mel) began to work with the Town of Bedford (by then the Sandy Lake area was part of Bedford) to ensure that it become easier to protect the lake.

About a decade after the first offer, the family's offer to provide ~500 acres west of Sandy Lake to the park was repeated, this time to Bedford Town Council. However, this time it was for sale, not a gift. Town Council turned down the offer. Developers were aware of this change in circumstance. In a Town Council vote in September 1982 pro-development councillors passed a new Zoning Bylaw and a Municipal Development Plan that changed much of the Sandy Lake area zoning from Park to Secondary Development Area (SDA), or Urban Reserve, for future development.

The Mayor of Bedford at the time, Francene Cosman, saw the importance of this area. By 1983, after failed attempts of various levels of government to formally create the Sandy Lake Regional Park, Mayor Cosman and the Sandy Lake Ratepayers Association hit upon a device for protecting the lake—the creation of a by-law that would allow no new development on properties on Sandy Lake unless they were a minimum of 5 acres and on a publicly serviced road that was a public road before October 9, 1991. This regulation was put in place and is still protecting Sandy Lake. However, land assembly began as developers eyed Sandy Lake for residential development.

Over the next few years Bedford purchased and acquired parts of the shore of Sandy Lake for the proposed park: in July 22, 1985 the Province and Town cooperated to purchase \$700,000 worth of land from McCulloch and Co. The purchase included 236 acres for Sandy Lake Park, and 61 for Admirals Cove Park.

In 1986 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) gave approximately 1,000 acres at Jack Lake to the Province. The public housing development CMHC had planned for Jack Lake would not be built because of the need for at least one expensive highway interchange, possibly two, and due to extensive mitigations required to prevent environmental damage to Jack, Sandy and Marsh lakes. (4)

March 9, 1992, Farmers Dairy gave 6 acres to the Town of Bedford specifically for the park. The 6 acres included the roadway and the unused underground effluent pipe to the lake. A covenant required that the land be used only for public parkland, no buildings, and no parking or travel over the lands by motor vehicles of any kind.

In the intervening years, all six of the other regional park locations were preserved, but the Sandy Lake Regional Park proposal ran into difficulties of various kinds.

At amalgamation, in 1996, the Town of Bedford's work to acquire land and create the regional park fell by the wayside in the new Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM).

The next major issue arose as the turn of the millennium approached. The Bedford Lions Club expressed a desire to mark the millennium with a public project. The original proposed regional park plan (from the MAPC plans) had included a small beach park where the popular Bedford Lions Beach Park now exists. HRM, the Province and the Lions Club donated \$500,000 for its recreational development. While surveys of the Bedford and Hammonds Plains communities for recreational preferences all suggested that people wanted an indoor year-round "swimming opportunity" and hiking trails, the beach plan was chosen, and

a portion of the original proposed Sandy Lake Regional Park was designated the Bedford Lion's Beach Park.

There were numerous environmental protection challenges in the design of the Bedford Lions Beach Park – grades, drainage and backfilling plans had to be adjusted so that there would be no washouts and flooding. A plan to remove the trees and the natural shore berm, and to add tons of sand to make a bigger beach, which would have destroyed a fish breeding area, was altered to protect the shoreline and wildlife. Planners proposed flush toilets which would have required cutting down a football-sized area of old growth Acadian Forest along the shore to create the sewage disposal field. The Sandy Lake Ratepayers Association was able to make the case for protecting the natural beach and for trailhead peat toilets instead, similar to those used by Parks Canada and the US National Parks Service. They were installed and have worked well. The trees were saved, the ecosystem and the beauty of the area were preserved, and the natural beach has been a fine addition to Sandy Lake. Again, residents worked with decision-makers to see to the lake's needs.

Somewhere in the midst of all the meetings and activities around the beach project some in the Sandy Lake Ratepayers Association realized that there would always be issues that could harm the lake, and that, in the end, it was the quality of the water that had to be protected. So, the Sandy Lake Watershed Association was started. For several years there was regular water testing carried out by the Bedford Water Advisory Committee... but that was eventually cut from the city's budget.

As the Bedford Lion's Beach Park progressed, the Sandy Lake Watershed Association successfully advocated for the elimination of a planned boat launch facility, reducing the number of motorized water craft using the lake and thereby further protecting the sensitive wildlife. It is important to note that this undertaking did not have the intention of removing motorized water craft from the lake, as it was recognized that a number of existing private landholders on the lake had (and continue to have) motorized water craft. It was assumed that lake dwellers would understand what is needed to protect their lake's health, in particular to keep the Common Loon families and take special care to prevent oil and gas leakage. Keeping the numbers of motorized boats down would reduce risks to the lake.

Under the first Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (RMPS 2006), some lands originally proposed as part of the Sandy Lake Regional Park, but rezoned during Bedford's tenure, were designated by HRM as urban settlement, with the intention of developing the lands within 25 years. The projected "build out" population for Sandy Lake was identified as 12,000. The 2018 projection was for up to 16,000 residents. (5)

The same year, 2006, the Province gave the 1,000 Jack Lake acres, minus 50 acres for a proposed prison, to the municipality. A successful lobby by Sackville Rivers Association (SRA) and the Watershed association and others made the Jack Lake lands a Regional Park. It remains identified as park today,

usually listed on city documents as Sandy Lake Regional Park. The prison proposal did not come to fruition and then the 50 acres set aside for the prison were later given to the city for the park.

However, without most community knowing, the Watershed and Ratepayers associations' teams had worn out. The groups became inactive. The Sackville Rivers Association, however, continued its to-date 3.5 decades of work to return Wild Atlantic Salmon to the Sackville River system, including to Sandy Lake. By 2019 Salmon were again being seen and caught in Sandy Lake. Volunteer hours and government and community-based funding tell the story of a well-earned success.

In 2009, environmental consulting company CBCL carried out a Cost of Servicing Study commissioned by HRM. The Sandy Lake Watershed Association members were not aware of the study.

In 2013, the city gave/traded 50 acres of the Jack Lake lands (beside Smith's Road that leads to the park entrance) to Sobeys/Crombie REIT in an exchange to protect land at Moirs Mills Pond (about 2 acres of underwater area beside their Mill Cove store). Thus, the city unfortunately traded out park land to protect other park land (at a rate of 50 acres for 2 acres) without the community knowing.

During that same summer, 2013, Armco Capital developers cut 300 acres of trees from their land on the west side of Sandy Lake. The owner told the newly formed Sandy Lake Conservation Association (SLCA) he did so because he was angry that the city was not allowing him to proceed with development yet. No municipal, provincial, or federal laws existed to prevent such loss of ecological assets on privately owned land. The SLCA with the help of additional community members and a newly formed relationship with the Ecology Action Centre staged a protest that drew media attention to the issue and created an opportunity to meet with the developer. The developer expressed interest in helping the lake protection effort, stopped further cutting, and in October, 2015, Armco Capital 'sold' 160 acres to HRM for the park in exchange for a park land dedication debt it owed.

Most developers' lands west of Sandy Lake were not included in the staff report's conceptual map regarding this land acquisition at Sandy Lake. Staff informed SLCA that this map was not a conceptual park boundary, but was drawn to deliberately exclude other developer-owned properties so as to ensure the purchase went through without resistance. The document did, however, clearly list why all of the lands to the west of Sandy and Marsh Lakes were valuable to acquire for the park, and stated that "In keeping with the Regional Plan, the Marsh Lake lands are highly desired for regional park purposes..." "...This land will serve as a positive move to protect and preserve high value ecological lands associated with the Sackville River Corridor." (6) (Item No. 8.1 Halifax Regional Council, Oct 6, 2015)

The map created for that 160-acre acquisition, known as the 2015 Conceptual Map, became the map used by City Council from 2018 onwards for considerations for parkland acquisition. The community remains concerned because it was drawn for a different purpose. The ecologically important lands west of Sandy and Marsh Lakes had been left out for a specific purpose, but were still important to acquire for the health of the park.

At the September 15, 2014 meeting of HRM's North West Community Council, a petition was presented by the SLCA requesting that the municipality expand the park lands surrounding Marsh Lake and Sandy Lake to create a regional park and wilderness area following the original 1971 biologists' plan. Staff responded with an Information report to Community Council indicating that planning and land acquisitions for the Regional Park were continuing, and directing community efforts for the park into the Halifax Green Network Plan (HGPN). Thus began a decade of work where Sandy Lake was recognized in the HGPN for its outstanding ecological values that conflicted with housing zoning, and also for its essential and important wildlife connectivity to the Chebucto Peninsula.

Since 2017, SLCA had invited scientists and professional planners to look at the area and determine if it was still valuable to preserve after all of these decades. Links to multiple studies are available on the SLCA website. (7) The volume of studies and spin-off benefits to local schools, universities and citizens is beyond the scope of this article. If anything, the area is more valuable now than it was in 1971, partly because of its value for research and education but also for its ability to help with the dual crises of Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss.

In 2018, SLCA met with Clayton Developments' CEO who then offered to work with the city to trade their Sandy Lake properties for developable lands elsewhere. City planners confirmed that finding the trade was completely doable. However, despite two years of efforts by the SLCA and SRA, the local councillor did not bring the opportunity before Council.

Also in 2018, SLCA and the Sackville Rivers Association joined forces to create the 30-group Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park Coalition which became the ongoing coordinator of park protection efforts of the many groups.

With the help of Federal MP Geoff Regan, in 2020, the puzzle was solved as to why the 50-acre property around Marsh Lake, previously owned by CMHC, was not transferred to the city along with the other 1,000 'Jack Lake' acres. In 1999 a clerical error occurred whereby the deed that transferred Marsh Lake from CMHC to NS Municipal Affairs and Housing was not registered in the deeds office with all of the other Jack Lake deeds. The Department was not aware that it owned Marsh Lake until SLCA and Mr. Regan informed them of the error in 2020. A staff person in Municipal Affairs was put in charge of, as he put it, "seeing the right thing done". However, at time of writing, 2025, two elections and several shifts of staff later, the effort to have Marsh Lake rejoin its counterparts in the park has not yet succeeded.

Community protection of park assets continues. The Sandy Lake area Security Committee was started in the spring of 2021 following a July, 2020 incident in Sandy Lake Park where 4 nesting painted turtles, a Species at Risk, were deliberately piled up and run over by motorized off-road vehicles. HRM has a bylaw P-600 to prevent vehicular and other damage to city parks but it is hard to enforce.

SLCA organized neighbouring entities including the SRA, Nova Scotia Power, DND Rifle Range, and Halifax Water, who, along with City Parks, Halifax Police, RCMP, the NS Depts of Environment and DNRR, NS

Dept of Public Works, Jeep and ATV Associations, devised a successful, ongoing, cooperative plan to curb wildlife destruction, vandalism, hunting, fires, and other illegal behaviours in the park and the neighbouring properties.

On July 21, 2021 HRM completed the purchase of 44.85 acres of ecologically rich woodland from Beaver Bank businessman, David Barrett, of Barrett Lumber. This parcel, which runs from the shore of the Sackville River through Marsh Lake to the shores of Sandy Lake, is an important addition to Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park. The property contains old growth forests, drumlins, river and lake frontage, and wetlands. Community members identified its availability and encouraged the city to purchase it.

In 2021, a joint province-wide project between the NS Departments of Environment and Climate Change and Natural Resources and Ducks Unlimited Canada chose the wetlands around Marsh Lake as a Treasured Wetland. As part of the work to have scientists evaluate the area's natural assets, Ducks Unlimited Canada had completed a series of studies of the area's wetlands. Marsh Lake was found to be an astoundingly ecologically rich and biodiverse marsh. It is fed by Sandy Lake, and in turn feeds the Sackville River.

In Summer 2021, the independent conservation funding group, the NS Crown Share Land Legacy Trust, authored a report on wildlife corridors connecting the Chebucto Peninsula to the mainland Nova Scotia. This report included a finding that echoed a result from the Halifax Green Network Plan – it showed that there are vital, irreplaceable wildlife corridors passing through the Sandy Lake-Sackville River area, including on the west side of Sandy Lake. In 2023 the report was adopted by HRM Council to be part of the HGNP. Sandy Lake-Sackville River wildlife corridors are pinch points needed to preserve the wildlife movement on and off of the Chebucto Peninsula, including wildlife in Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes and Purcell's Cove's Shaw Wilderness Park.

June 13, 2022, a SLCA member discovered a map showing Shaw Group Ltd. (Clayton Developments is a Shaw Group company) recently acquired two properties that run from Sandy Lake through Marsh Lake and all the way to Sackville River. They run alongside the Barrett strip that was recently purchased by the city. A city councillor reported back from staff that the purchase was a surprise to Council and staff. That the city lawyers had been in final stages of purchasing of the two properties, and that Shaw had suddenly purchased them for 2.5 times the amount the city had offered.

July 8, 2022, environmental consulting company, McCallum Environmental Limited, completed the Sandy Lake Ecological Features Assessment, commissioned by HRM. Its 'heatmap' outlined the ecological values in the area, although the old growth tree stands were not all included and it does not identify a proposed, expanded park boundary. Boundary designation was one of the main points of this study as far as community understood. However, it provided guidance for what are the valuable lands needing acquisition in order to preserve the park's natural assets. It recommended in this special case, where a Regional Park's assets stand to be affected by potential development, that should development go

ahead, 100 m buffers around watercourses, and 50 m buffers around wetlands could adequately protect these water features. In the Council meeting, staff reported that the developer had sent a message saying that there would be no land left to develop if such buffers were enforced. Notably, City Council created and passed a motion to create the buffers of “at least” the recommended sizes.

A housing crisis was announced just after the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021 the Progressive Conservative Provincial Government responded by removing decision-maker power from HRM for select areas proposed for development. The Province chose 9 areas from 3 priority tiers on the city’s list of 23 areas being studied for potential housing. Those 9 became Special Planning Areas (SPA) to be fast-tracked by the Province’s new, appointed authority for these areas, called the Task Force on Housing in HRM. Six of the 9 were owned by Clayton Developments, and were selected despite not all being tier-one priority. One of these areas selected as a Special Planning Area was the land west and south of Sandy Lake, controlled by Clayton.

Then as part of a fall 2024 pre-election announcement, the Province added yet another threat to the area’s ecological welfare. It announced a connector road/highway between Hammonds Plains Road and Sackville that would run through the headwaters of Sandy Lake, cutting through not only the tributaries but also the wildlife corridors identified in the Halifax Green Network Plan and the NS Crown Share Land Legacy Trust’s wildlife corridor report. Without adequate wildlife corridors, species will gradually die off in the Chebucto Peninsula. Maintaining those corridors was a central focus of the city’s HGNP. Thus, this new challenge has been added to the ongoing efforts to protect the watershed and park.

About 1,700 acres of the Sandy Lake to Sackville River interconnected area remain to be protected. The domino-effect of building in the proposed SPA area containing the 3 main tributaries would ruin the extraordinary assets of the park, lakes, and river, harming the outstanding biodiversity, including recently-returned Wild Atlantic Salmon. Ongoing scientific studies reveal the overall area’s values remain although Sandy Lake’s water quality is inching toward a tipping-point. We must choose to reverse that and not make it any worse.

This paper can not possibly include every example of what anyone has ever done for the lake and area. These are examples of investments of time, funds, and effort toward preserving this watershed and its park.

Everything is at risk unless the Premier and his government join the effort to preserve this extraordinary ecological unit for the good of all.

- *Sandy Lake Conservation Association*

Endnotes:

1. <http://sandylake.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1971-PB-Dean-Environment-Report.pdf>
2. <http://sandylake.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1971-MAPC-Rec-Work-Group-Report-7-Regional-Parks.pdf>
3. <http://sandylake.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1979-Halifax-Dartmouth-Regional-Parks-Short-Report.pdf>
4. <https://sandylake.org/1986-jack-lake-environmental-evaluation-final-report-2/>
5. <http://legacycontent.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/documents/101116cow3-217.pdf>
6. <http://legacycontent.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/documents/151006ca81i.pdf>
7. www.sandylake.org, including <https://sandylake.org/collection-of-studies-in-sandy-lake-bedford/>

For source materials and more detail go to:

Sandy Lake Area Timeline: <https://sandylake.org/time-line/>

The Precarious State of Sandy Lake - Report to The Premier, Oct 1 2024: <https://sandylake.org/news-2/>

Sandy Lake Ecological Features Assessment, McCallum, 2022:

<https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/220712rc15110.pdf>

The Precarious State of Sandy Lake - Report to The Premier: <https://sandylake.org/news-2/>

Why It Makes Sense for the Province to save Sandy Lake <https://sandylake.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Why-remove-Sandy-Lake-from-SPA-list-November-2023.pdf>

Natural Wonders Avian Species report: <http://sandylake.org/avian-and-species-at-risk/>

Park Planning Study: <http://sandylake.org/sandy-lake-sackville-river-regional-park-2020-planning-study-2/>

SLCA Website: www.sandylake.org

Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park Coalition website: www.sandylakecoalition.ca

Sandy Lake and environs website: <http://www.versicolor.ca/sandylakebedford>

Drone video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJwTLlYIbZg>

Ducks Unlimited Marsh Lake wetland video 2022:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4274e1c1ec584850b613e5c856b0eef0>



B. Sarty photo

Sandy Lake housing clear-cut in progress 2013, as seen from Lions' Club Beach