

Profile: Michelle MacGregor

By Tom Mason

For as long as she can remember, Michelle MacGregor has loved “playing outdoors” - indulging in her love of nature with activities like skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and mountain biking. But it never occurred to the Hammonds Plains native that she could make a living at it until she entered Grade 12. “My biology teacher made learning about biology fun,” she explains. “I started to think this would be the perfect way to spend the rest of my life - playing outside in nature and learning about different species at the same time” .

After graduating from St. Francis Xavier University with a Bachelor of Science degree, MacGregor went on to complete a Master of Science degree at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George where her research focused on the restoration of sub-boreal forests.

Today, MacGregor is halfway through her first full-time job as a professional biologist, a one-year internship with the DNR Wildlife Division’s Biodiversity Program. Her work focuses on two species - Nova Scotia’s vulnerable population of wood turtle and the endangered boreal felt lichen.

Being listed as vulnerable means that any change in the wood turtle’s habitat in Nova Scotia could land them on the endangered species list. “We’re identifying wood turtle hot spots and areas that need conservation efforts,” she says. Based on that information, and consultation with experts, she is creating a management plan that will help scientists, naturalists, and land users to provide protection for the wood turtle.

The boreal felt lichen is in a much more fragile state in Nova Scotia, and in other areas around the world, says MacGregor. Currently, it is known to exist in eastern Halifax County. “The species used to be quite widespread in Atlantic Canada. The Nova Scotia and New Brunswick populations are now listed as endangered. It’s very sensitive to air pollution, acid rain, and changes in natural succession in forests. It can be considered an indicator of environmental health in this region.”

MacGregor recently organized a workshop that brought together experts from across Atlantic Canada to discuss issues related to the boreal felt lichen. She is also creating brochures and articles to raise awareness about the species.

Just seven years past her high school graduation, MacGregor has compiled an impressive resume. She is a member of the National Youth Round Table on the Environment (YRTE) - a federal program for youth who are involved in environmental work. “The idea is to bring the youth voice to Environment Canada,” she says. “We meet in person three times a year, and work on environmental issues that are important to us.”

As a member of the YRTE, Michelle:

- participated in the Youth Action Summit 2002 in the Netherlands with young people from 58 countries.
- presented a workshop on climate change at the United Nations International Children’s Conference on the Environment in Victoria.
- participated in the Federal Science and Technology Forum in Aylmer, Quebec. “Of the 350 people involved, there were very few people under 40. It was fun to talk to high level officials about where we think science and technology should be going, because we are the ones who will be working in that field in 10 or 20 years.”

MacGregor isn’t sure where the next challenge will take her when her term with DNR is up in July. Like most young people, she has a hard time envisioning where her career will take her in 20 or 30 years. But she knows that her love of nature conservation will still be strong. “I see myself working in community forestry, maybe as a forester,” she says. “But I also see myself working at a national or international level to promote sustainable forestry and nature conservation. I love science and I love research, but I also love working with people. And I think that’s really the key to conservation - getting people in the community involved.”



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One of MacGregor’s subjects: the Wood Turtle