



# St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project

## *Final Report to Habitat Conservation Fund*

*April 2007*



### **Introduction**

The first year of the St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project has resulted in a number of successes, including the permanent protection of 95 acres of conservation lands adjacent to the river. Through the project, awareness about the importance of private land conservation has been increased amongst landowners and the local community.

### **Project Goal and Objectives**

***Project Goal:*** To permanently protect natural areas in the St. Mary's River Watershed, including critical habitats supporting Atlantic Salmon, old-growth Acadian floodplain or Hemlock forests, or Wood Turtles, and to increase landowner and community awareness of land conservation issues, while engaging people in land stewardship.

#### ***Objectives:***

- To encourage protection of priority conservation sites on private lands along the St. Mary's River;
- To develop awareness among community members, recreation users of the river, and summer visitors, of the need to protect the St. Mary's River, and options for participation in conservation;
- To foster a strong land stewardship ethic, and engage local community members in habitat conservation on the St. Mary's River;
- To permanently secure at least three priority conservation sites on the St. Mary's River, protecting significant wildlife habitat supporting Atlantic Salmon, old-growth Acadian floodplain or Hemlock

- forests, forest floodplain communities, or Wood Turtles;
- To collaborate with community partners to identify additional priority sites along the river for permanent protection as conservation lands.

## Project Activities and Results

### ▪ *Landowner outreach:*

- A total of 74 landowners with property bordering the St. Mary's River were mailed letters that introduced the Nature Trust and the St. Mary's River Conservation Project. The letters included a factsheet about the river, with suggestions for ways that individual landowners can help to protect the river. The letters were followed up with phone calls and visits. In total, 35 landowners received telephone calls and 12 landowner visits were conducted.



- Visits were followed-up with thank you letters and further information for those landowners that requested it.
- A review of the first year of the landowner outreach program was conducted. Based on the lessons learned and accomplishments of the program, the year two landowner outreach program is being designed.

### ▪ *Public Education:*

- An educational brochure was developed and over 800 copies have been distributed through Nature Trust events, landowner meetings, and by partner organizations.
- A community event was held to celebrate the securement of the *A.M. "Sandy" Cameron Conservation Lands*. Over 100 people attended, including representatives of partner organizations, supporters and community members. Following speeches by representatives of the Nature Trust and the St. Mary's River Association, attendees participated in guided nature walks and enjoyed a community barbeque. This event generated excellent media coverage, with articles in provincial and local newspapers and coverage by CBC radio.
- Nature Trust staff have delivered presentations at St. Mary's River Association board meetings and the Association's Annual General Meeting.
- The Nature Trust's *Land Stewards* newsletter, designed specifically for landowners and volunteers, features several articles about the project, riverbank stewardship, and opportunities for volunteering with the project. The most recent issue of the newsletter is being distributed to landowners and community members.
- The St. Mary's River project has been featured in the last two issues of *Natural Landscapes*, the Nature Trust's newsletter.
- A number of media articles have been published on the St. Mary's River Campaign (Chronicle Herald, Atlantic Salmon Journal, Lifestyle Nova Scotia) and on the securement of the *A.M. "Sandy" Conservation Lands* (Chronicle Herald, Antigonish Casket, Guysborough Journal). A feature article on the St. Mary's River Project, and the Cameron family and their land donation, was published in the Winter issue of the Atlantic Salmon Journal. As well, an article about the project appears in the current issue of the St. Mary's River Association Newsletter.

### ▪ *Property Guardian program:*

- Through the Nature Trust's volunteer recruitment program, interested individuals have been informed of the opportunity to become a Property Guardian in the St. Mary's River area. The first

training session has been completed, with two volunteers attending the session. Property Guardians are the Nature Trust's "eyes and ears on the ground" and assist with monitoring protected properties.

▪ **Land Securement:**

- Two priority conservation sites have been secured. Consisting of two separate sites, the A.M. "Sandy" Cameron Conservation Lands protect a total of 95 acres (41 acres and 54 acres). The northern location features pockets of old forest, significant wetland areas and sensitive floodplain and shoreline habitat. The site also provides valuable habitat for the Wood turtle, a national species-at-risk. The southern site consists of Acadian floodplain forest and an extensive area of old-growth Hemlock forest.
- Additional high priority conservation sites have been identified in consultation with voluntary scientific advisors and the St. Mary's River Association, St. Francis Xavier University, and the Department of Natural Resources. Site visits have been carried out at several locations along the river to conduct habitat assessments and assess ecological features of the properties. Based on these assessments, the Nature Trust has entered into discussions with several potential land donors to provide information for these landowners on protection options and to negotiate possible protection measures. Several properties are in the securement process of negotiation, legal and technical procedures.
- Two interpretive signs have been designed and manufactured for the A.M. "Sandy" Cameron Conservation Lands. These signs highlight the importance of private land conservation and describe the natural features that the conservation lands protect, as well as telling the story of the landowners and their donation.



▪ **Partnerships:**

- The St. Mary's River Association is an important local partner for the Nature Trust. There is on-going dialogue between the Nature Trust and the Association to keep the Association informed of our activities, to gather advice and information on our efforts, and to work jointly on outreach events.
- To help identify priority sites for permanent securement, the Nature Trust has consulted community partners and researchers, including the St. Mary's River Association, St. Francis Xavier University, and the Department of Natural Resources.

**Achievements and Lessons Learned**

- Over the course of the previous year, the Nature Trust has achieved numerous successes for the *St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project*.
  - 95 acres of land, including over one kilometre of river shoreline, have been protected, forever. These sites protect old-growth Hemlock forests, Acadian floodplain forests, and critical habitat for Wood Turtles. The properties will be monitored regularly by volunteer Property Guardians.
  - Substantial community support exists for the project, which has been fostered through several project activities. The targeted landowner outreach campaign has engaged the community in land



protection and encouraged individual land stewardship. As well, the distribution of outreach materials and the highly successful property closing celebration have helped to generate positive public support for land conservation.

- The project has received significant media coverage, including provincial media and local media in Guysborough County. Media coverage has generated increased awareness about the St. Mary's River, the importance of land protection to ensuring the health of the river, and the important role the Nature Trust plays in private land conservation. This increased awareness helps to facilitate the outreach and education aspects of the St. Mary's River project.
- Lessons learned include the value of strong partnerships with both local and provincial level conservation organizations. These partnerships have been valuable resources for advice on site prioritization, for volunteer recruitment, and for public outreach.

## **Recommendations for follow-up**

### *Land Securement*

- A tremendous opportunity exists now to preserve a broader area of this important habitat and the unique species it supports, while the most significant natural features and processes of the watershed are still intact. On-going activities include:
  - Identifying and prioritizing additional sites for permanent protection, in consultation with community partners
  - Identifying, contacting and negotiating formal conservation agreements with landowners of priority habitats
  - Completing ongoing negotiations initiated in previous year of the project
  - Completing habitat assessments and formal securement procedures

### *Outreach*

- The project will continue to deliver the landowner outreach program to further increase support for private land conservation and stewardship of wildlife habitat, with activities including:
  - maintaining contact with key landowners
  - identifying new key landowners



- Public outreach and education activities will also continue, to further increase awareness of the river and its unique habitats, and of options for taking action to help the conservation of significant natural areas along the river. Activities include:
  - hosting community events, including guided walks and stewardship presentations
  - targeted distribution of interpretative material
  - developing additional interpretive materials
  - public celebrations to mark project achievements
  - supporting existing volunteer Property Guardians and training new guardians