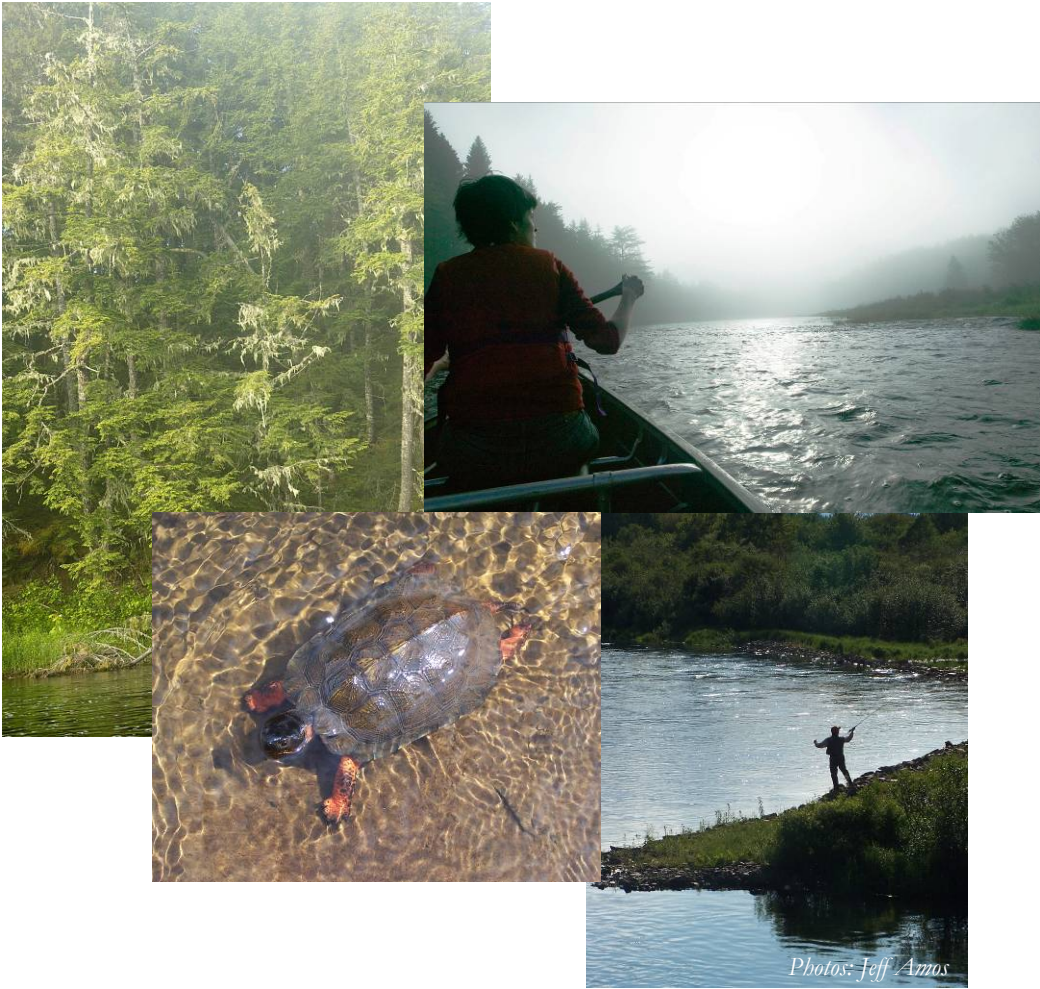


St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project 2007 – 2008

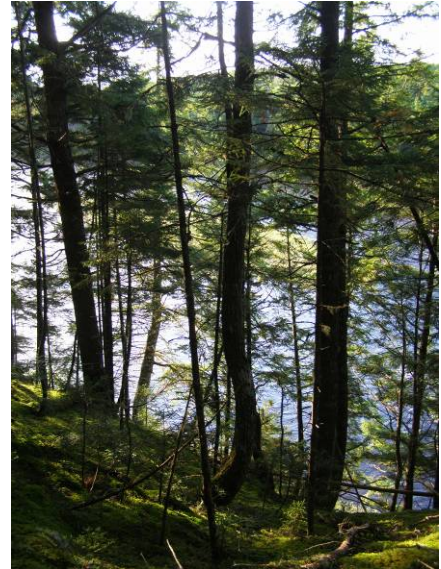


Final Report to Habitat Conservation Fund
October 2008



INTRODUCTION

The St. Mary's River, in Guysborough County, supports a wealth of ecological riches. Along the shores of the river are some of the most intact and extensive remnants of Acadian floodplain forest found in the province, as well as significant stands of old-growth hemlock forests. The river also provides habitat for wood turtles (a nationally threatened species), and the globally rare Atlantic salmon. Recognizing the opportunity to protect some of these unique natural features, the Nova Scotia Nature Trust began the *St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project* in 2006. In the 2007-2008 project year, the Nature Trust continued landowner outreach and community stewardship activities, and permanently protected the Hemlock Falls Conservation Lands. This stunning property represents the third site along the river protected to date through the campaign.



PROJECT GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of the *St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project* is to permanently protect natural habitats along the St. Mary's River, in order to help ensure the long-term health and ecological integrity of the river and the survival of associated species, including Atlantic salmon and wood turtles. Priority habitats include old-growth Acadian floodplain and hemlock forests, and riparian areas. Other objectives include increasing landowner and community awareness of land conservation issues, and engaging people in land stewardship.

The objectives of the project (2007-2008) were:

Stewardship

- 1) To cultivate support for permanent land conservation on private lands along the St. Mary's River and foster awareness of options for protection of land among owners of priority conservation properties.
- 2) To engage local community members in the long-term stewardship of lands protected through the project.
- 3) To enhance partnerships with other groups working in the St. Mary's River area, including the St. Mary's River Association, to ensure effective long-term stewardship of the watershed.

Education

- 4) To increase public awareness of the importance of the river, its unique habitats, land stewardship, and options for taking action to help the conservation of significant natural areas along the river.

Securement

- 5) To permanently protect one priority conservation site along the St. Mary's River.
- 6) To work with community partners and scientific advisors to identify additional priority sites for future protection.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

Stewardship / Outreach

- In the summer of 2007, over 70 landowners along the St. Mary's were sent letters highlighting the importance of protecting natural riparian areas. Landowners were also sent a Shoreline Stewardship factsheet, which included information on how landowners can be good stewards of riverfront property. In 2008, a total of 150 landowners were contacted, and either introduced to the St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project, or received a project update. Landowners requesting additional information on the project, shoreline stewardship, or land conservation were visited by Nature Trust staff.
- The Nature Trust's *Land Stewards* newsletter, a publication that is designed specifically for landowners and volunteers, was distributed to over 150 landowners along the river.
- Four new volunteer Property Guardians were recruited and trained to monitor lands protected by the Nature Trust in the St. Mary's River Watershed.
- In partnership with the St. Mary's River Association, the Nature Trust held *River Days*, a day of exploration and learning on the St. Mary's River. The event is now held annually, and draws community members for a day of guided nature walks, a St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project update, and a BBQ. In 2007, nearly 40 people attended, and in 2008, nearly 70 people were present.
- A public announcement and reception to celebrate the protection of the *Hemlock Falls Conservation Lands* was held in Halifax in April 2008. The event was well-attended by over 70 people, including community members and landowners, government and non-government partners, and Nature Trust members and volunteers.



Partnerships

- The Nature Trust is continuing to work closely with our main project partners, the St. Mary's River Association (SMRA). There are ongoing communications between the two

organizations, and we have worked jointly on community outreach events and educational activities. The River Association continues to be an important source of information and advice.

- A St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project display was exhibited at the Nova Scotia Salmon Association's Annual General Meeting, and an article about the project appeared in their annual newsletter.
- We have partnered with the provincial Departments of Environment and Natural Resources to protect land along the St. Mary's River.

Education

- A project display was created and installed at the SMRA Interpretive Centre.
- An updated project brochure was created and is being distributed to the public, through the SMRA, local DNR offices, and the Atlantic Salmon Federation.
- The project has received significant media coverage, both provincially and locally, including a feature article in the Chronicle Herald, as well as articles in the Guysborough Journal and the Antigonish Casket.

Securement

- A high priority site on the West Branch of the St. Mary's River, known as the *Hemlock Falls Conservation Lands*, has been protected in perpetuity. This 220-acre property supports over four kilometers of shoreline, while supporting a significant stand of old-growth hemlock and red spruce forest. The area also provides important habitat for both wood turtles and Atlantic salmon. The property was protected in partnership with the Province of Nova Scotia, and will be preserved as a Nature Reserve.
- Interpretive signage for the *Hemlock Falls Conservation Lands* has been designed and installed. The sign highlights the protected status of the area and the important natural features that it supports.
- We are continuing to work with private landowners along the St. Mary's River, to protect additional high priority natural habitats.



LESSONS LEARNED

The approach that the Nature Trust has taken in protecting land along the St. Mary's River could be used as a model for other organizations wishing to undertake a similar conservation initiative, particularly on other salmon rivers. We have learned that landowner and community outreach and engagement is essential to the success of any such project, and that it is important to work in partnership with other groups to achieve significant conservation goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP

The activities launched through the St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Project will continue into the future. Through the course of the project, the Nature Trust has identified additional properties of high conservation value, and landowners who wish to protect their lands along the river. The Nature Trust will continue its land securement activities, as well as our community and landowner outreach activities, and volunteer Property Guardian program. It is our long-term goal to continue to work with private landowners to create a "ribbon of green" – a network of connected conservation lands along the river. We will also work with the Province of Nova Scotia to encourage the protection of significant Crown lands along the river.