



Turning Tides *Opportunities and Challenges for Ecotourism in the Bay of Fundy*

By Frances Figart

How can people know that they need to protect a place unless they experience it fully and gain an understanding of its inhabitants?

A kayak is an excellent vehicle from which to experience a marine ecosystem. And here in the Quoddy Region of the Bay of Fundy, marine life is as diverse as the famous Fundy tides are dramatic.

“ The Quoddy Region in the Bay of Fundy
– a marine environment every bit as diverse as a rainforest
ecosystem – is crying out for protection.”

Bruce Smith, owner, Seascape Kayak Tours

The Quoddy Region is located on the Atlantic Ocean at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy on the border between Maine, USA, and New Brunswick, Canada. The eco-economy here approaches one billion dollars annually, employs thousands of individuals, and includes whale-watching, birding and sea kayaking as well as a number of well-known tourism staples: St. Stephen, famous for Ganong Chocolates; St. Andrews, a spectacular resort town; Campobello, where FDR's summer cottage and International Park are located; Black's Harbour, home of the world's largest sardine factory; and Grand Manan, an island known around the world for its spectacular scenery.



Seascape tours are designed for eight or fewer kayakers to minimize impact on the environment; there is one guide for every four clients.

Close by and lesser known, but all the more precious because of its remoteness, is Deer Island, where TIES member Seascape Kayak Tours has its base of operations May through October. The Seascape residence and shop – where wilderness first aid and introduction to sea kayaking courses are taught – look out over Northwest Harbour on the Bay of Fundy. Twice a day, the water comes right up to the rack where stable fiberglass tandem kayaks are housed, and then several hours later, recedes 26 feet or more, revealing rock formations, seaweed and hardy intertidal invertebrates. Vacationers coming into this environment have the opportunity to experience a unique ecosystem that supports over 2,000 species of plants and animals.





Bruce Smith built Seascape 14 years ago on the philosophy that small group travel is imperative to minimize any environmental impact on fragile coastal ecosystems and to allow for a more authentic and enriching personal connection to the biodiversity of the Bay of Fundy. Group size rarely exceeds eight, and the guide-to-client ratio is one to four or less. Launching from the protection of the harbor, paddlers on Seascape's half- or full-day trips are certain to see Bald Eagles that nest on many of the Fundy islands, and groups of curious and playful Harbor Seals and Grey Seals.



Grey Seal just off Deer Island with herring weir in background.



Bald Eagle seen from kayak just off Deer Island.

Most of July through September, sea kayakers also encounter vast pods of Harbor Porpoise, listed as a "species of concern" by the Canadian Government; a prime porpoise nursery is nestled at the mouth of the Head Harbour Passage area. And, during much of the summer, Seascape's ecotourists are also graced with Finback and Minke Whale sightings. All these animals are here to feed on copepods, krill and other planktonic species that comprise a complex food web that supports what scientists have identified as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots.



*Minke Whale off Long Eddy rip, Grand Manan
(Photo Credit: Laurie Murison, Grand Manan Whale & Seabird Research Station)*



*Fin whales off White Head Island
(Photo Credit: Laurie Murison, Grand Manan Whale & Seabird Research Station)*





“We see so many amazing creatures from our kayaks, but we keep a respectful distance from the animals to minimize their stress,” said Smith, whose Fundy paddling trips have also crossed paths with Northern Right Whales, of which only some 400 still survive. This species comes here each year to feed and raise their young, and there is a Right Whale Sanctuary off Grand Manan. Although Right Whales have been protected from hunting since the 1930s, they are still on the brink of extinction due to collisions with ships.



Seascope sea kayak safety course participants practicing rescues in tidal current.



Harbor Seals sunning on rocks, captured by a kayaker using a zoom lens at respectful distance.

And that threat could be heightened if plans proceed to allow huge tankers carrying liquefied natural gas (LNG) to sail right down Head Harbour Passage. Three separate proposals to build gargantuan marine terminals on the Maine shoreline threaten to turn a traditional tourism, fishing and aquaculture economy into an industrial zone fraught with the emission of six tons of greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals on a daily basis.

Gigantic tankers, each accompanied by a gunboat to protect the potentially hazardous cargo, could soon change the land and seascapes for tour operators, fishermen and fish farmers who depend on the pristine nature of the area.



A Finback Whale hit and killed by a cruise ship that came into St. John Harbor.

“These massive boats would have a devastating effect on the wildlife in the area and the presence of this huge offloading facility in our backyard would have an enormous environmental impact,” said Smith. “Seascope would be a part of the exclusion zone, so every time a tanker comes through we would have to be off the water for at least a 90-minute period, not that we would want to be out there in the bay with something this size.”





Indeed the magnitude of the tankers is hard to imagine, but they would be about the size of the Queen Mary (1,000 feet long and 12 stories high) and these monsters would pass through whale and porpoise feeding areas, breeding grounds and nurseries, as well as through aquaculture sites and fishing grounds for haddock, cod and pollock.



*A simulation of what an LNG tanker would look like in Bar Harbor, Maine.
(Photo Credit: Joyce Morrell)*

Highly controversial, fish farming began in 1979 on Deer Island. It has since grown into a major industry that employs large numbers of coastal residents. Patural International on Deer Island is the world's largest shipper of lobster. "The local fishery has sustained generation after generation and is worth about \$173 million on the Canadian side alone," says Art MacKay, director of the Quoddy Futures Foundation, which seeks to steer the local community away from industrial initiatives such as the LNG tanker proposals and back to its original eco-economy and sustainability. "This is an economic contest with a huge environmental backdrop. It's a choice: an economy based on our natural resources or heavy industrial development and loss of autonomy."

Seascape's tours take visitors past a series of herring weirs, a traditional method of fishing traced to the ancient Passamaquoddy Tribe that involves catching herring in a trap made from poles, brush and nets. Educating visitors about the local fishing culture in the Quoddy Region is an essential part of Seascape's commitment to providing opportunities for contact between visitors and coastal inhabitants as a means of involving local communities in tourism.



A paddler passes a herring weir, a traditional method of fishing traced to the ancient Passamaquoddy Tribe.





But the values of an ecotourism kayak tour operator and a traditional fisherman are often in conflict, says Smith, who has witnessed senseless seal shootings by fishermen who do not want to share their potential catch with opportunistic marine mammals.

Part of Seascope's environmental approach to waste management includes collecting and strapping onto sea kayaks trash and fishery debris left on the islands or in the ocean, which goes back to headquarters to be recycled. The company is also involved with local conservation efforts, spearheads marine ecosystem education initiatives and organizes annual beach sweeps and coastal cleanups for school groups and the community. A partnership with the Grand Manan Whale & Seabird Research Station is afoot to raise funding to protect the endangered Harbor Porpoise.

"Protection is an element of ecotourism that desperately needs attention here," said Smith, pointing out that in Costa Rica – where Seascope has made its winter base of operations for the past 13 years – the government has taken progressive steps to preserve 27 percent of land mass in protected areas and national parks. "The Quoddy Region in the Bay of Fundy – a marine environment every bit as diverse as a rainforest ecosystem – is crying out for such protection."



Like many Deer Island businesses, the Seascope shop sports a No LNG sign.

And that's precisely why Seascope places an emphasis on interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the Quoddy Region – and on its current challenges. "As an ecotour operator, we have an incredible opportunity to give folks who paddle with us an authentic understanding of all the living things in this unique marine ecosystem," said Smith. "But this understanding has to include not only the marine mammals, coastal birds and beautiful scenery, but also an awareness of the conflicts, challenges and threats to the health of this special marine environment, as this is the only way to engage visitors in its future protection."

Many facts and statistics in this article were provided by Art MacKay, Director, Quoddy Futures Foundation. To read more about the proposal to bring liquefied natural gas tankers into the Passamaquoddy Bay, see the LNG slide show on the Links page of the Seascope web site: www.seascopekayaktours.com.

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All photos in this article, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy of Seascope Kayak Tours.

