

Changing the World: Justin Trudeau Puts Nature Conservation in Perspective

By Daniel MacIsaac

“The Nova Scotia Nature Trust is doing its part to change the world.”

That fact was affirmed at the Nature Trust’s ninth-annual Dinner and Silent Auction on October 14. Not only because there was news of the latest wilderness-conservation success. Not only because the event raised money towards future projects. And not only because more than 300 Nature Trust members and guests had gathered at the Halifax Marriott Harbourfront Hotel for the event.

The Nova Scotia Nature Trust’s role in helping make the world a better place was affirmed because it was the dinner’s keynote speaker, Justin Trudeau, who said so.

Growing Up Green

The eldest son of Canada’s most-popular prime minister, the late Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Justin Trudeau, 34, speaks with sincerity, credibility and authority when it comes to the environment.

Besides boasting his father’s good looks and charisma, Justin Trudeau seems to have inherited his intelligence and love of Canada as well. And what’s more, as an educator, activist and outdoor enthusiast, Trudeau is making use of his considerable talents for the public good.

When not in his hometown Montreal, where he is completing a master’s program in environmental geography at McGill University, Trudeau travels the country conducting public speaking and advocacy work – especially though not exclusively for environmental groups and youth groups. He chairs the national youth program Katimavik, participates in the Harvest Montreal food bank program and campaigns for avalanche safety – ever since the death of his brother Michel in a 1998 avalanche.

Not least, through his involvement with the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Trudeau plays a personal role in land trusts and conservation work.

Shelter Cove

Trudeau was consequently well qualified to deliver the news of a major conservation achievement at the Nova Scotia Nature Trust annual dinner.

Dressed in a navy blue suit and an open-collar, violet-coloured shirt, Trudeau was the picture of casual elegance as he announced the news that Shelter Cove, a stunningly beautiful area of Eastern Shore headland outside Halifax, had been acquired and permanently protected. Shelter Cove is one of Nova Scotia's last pristine coastal headlands. This coastal treasure is home to secluded back-to-back white sand beaches, rugged rocky shores, and a diversity of wildlife. An outdoor enthusiast's dream, Shelter Cove is known for its outstanding sea kayaking, yachting, hiking, and wildlife watching.

The Nature Trust's Executive Director Bonnie Sutherland joined Trudeau to describe how the Nature Trust had managed to raise the \$640,000 in cash and in-kind contributions needed to secure the property as a "forever-wild conservation land" – to be preserved as a nature sanctuary. The Nature Trust's sixth major acquisition this year, Shelter Cove is the first to be acquired from another conservation group. Sutherland explained that the Friends of Nature Conservation Society had approached the Nova Scotia Nature Trust about taking over Shelter Cove, recognizing the Nature Trust's expertise in providing permanent, legal protection and ongoing stewardship for such valuable land holdings.

Trudeau acknowledged the importance of protecting private land beyond government control and the role land trusts play in that process.

"One of the things I talk about when I talk about national parks," Trudeau said, "is that when you create a national park in a particular section of wilderness it automatically begs the question that if you're protecting something inside the park, does that mean you're just giving up on any land outside the park?"

Trudeau and Sutherland elaborated on how in particular the land-ownership situation in Nova Scotia is, with the exception of Prince Edward Island, rather unique in Canada. About 70-75 per cent of Nova Scotia's land and 95 per cent of its coastline is privately owned. That leaves a much smaller proportion of crown-controlled land in Nova Scotia than almost anywhere else in the country – and it creates a much bigger need for non-government land trusts.

"Individual landowners are often much more comfortable with a non-governmental entity," Sutherland explained. "We're grassroots, we're on the ground, we're in their community, they know us, they trust us."

"There is a different role government needs to play compared to private land trusts, particularly creating a tax and financial climate that encourages private land conservation and

supports the critical work of land trust. But the two do work well together and there are complimentary goals.”

Stamp of Approval

The Nova Scotia government, represented by Environment Minister Mark Parent, couldn't agree with Sutherland more. Parent said the province is grateful for the Nature Trust's role in helping preserve wilderness areas – necessary areas that “are places to exercise the body and expand the mind and feed the spirit”.

“The Nature Trust helps provide support to Nova Scotia's system of protected areas and nature reserves,” Parent told his audience. “And your partnership and your support for the Nature Trust this evening is invaluable help in building the system through our common efforts.”

Part of that support for the Nature Trust came in the form of the more than 60 items donated by local artists and businesses for the silent auction held during the dinner. Auction items included a mahogany penguin sculpture by Peter Redden, a framed photograph of “Our Forest” by Jeff Amos, a carved woodpecker walking stick, a hooked-wool rug and a floral-patterned bowl by Birdsall Worthington Pottery of Mahone Bay.

Nature Trust members and volunteers also donated their time and effort throughout the evening. Nature Trust President Dale Smith acted as host of the event and, among the volunteers on hand, CBC Radio's Carmen Klassen served as master of ceremonies.

It was another dedicated conservationist, Mark Pulsifer, who was selected for special recognition. A provincial biologist, professor at St. Francis Xavier University and Vice-President of the Saint Mary's River Association, he received the Nova Scotia Nature Trust's 2006 Conservation Award in recognition of his innovative work with imperiled Wood Turtles and the “turtle kids.”.

In accepting the tribute, Pulsifer spoke of his work with the Wood Turtle Project and he added he looked forward to continued collaboration with the Nature Trust.

Keynote to Success

But it was Justin Trudeau who had the last word at the Nature Trust dinner. And at the centre of his keynote address was the role the Nature Trust, the government, but, above all, the role all of us can play in effective and sustainable nature conservation efforts.

Trudeau said even small-scale efforts – whether carpooling or cycling to work or buying environmentally friendly products – have a larger impact.

“It’s the right step,” he said. “The more each and every one of us takes little steps in our daily lives, it gets easier and easier for other people to make those similar steps.

“And as soon as the big corporations realize that consumers genuinely want to do something good for the environment, generally want to start changing their ways, there will be alternatives – because there is an awful lot of money to be made in doing the right thing.”

Trudeau also addressed the political question of Canada’s role in conservation – and in the world. In short, Trudeau urged action. He called on Canadians and the Canadian government to take a leadership role in global efforts to live, work and act in an environmentally responsible manner. He described Canada as well placed to play that role – pointing to its resources and the respect with which other countries view it. But he also warned Canada not to rest on its laurels and remain passive.

“We have this legitimacy, but we’ve been coasting for a long time,” Trudeau said. “When Canada begins to find real solutions, and shows that they work, countries around the world will start adopting them as quick as they can.”

Trudeau’s enthusiasm was infectious. He had already spoken of his own trip to Shelter Cove the day before and of an impromptu swim. And a slide presentation showed him scrambling over rocks and kayaking in the choppy Atlantic along with a team from the Nature Trust. Clearly, Trudeau practices what he preaches – and enjoys nature whenever the opportunity arises.

So it was with equal parts respect and enthusiasm that his final words were received. That’s when he said: “It’s up to each and every one of us to change the world.”

“That’s why it gives me such great pleasure to be here tonight,” Trudeau continued, “to celebrate a group of people, dedicated volunteers, people who believe in the cause of land conservation and preservation. Working tirelessly in a particular place - to make a difference and get the message out.

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