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Family islands to stay pristine

Back-to-landers make sure their South Shore retreat remains untouched

By BEVERLEY WARE South Shore Bureau

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Ned Zimmerman

THE TIDES make the snow on the beach look like applesauce, says Ned Zimmerman, describing life at his family's remote home on an island off Nova Scotia's South Shore.

Great Island, off Cherry Hill Beach, Queens County, is so quiet you hear the deer more than you see them, as they make strange barking sounds down on the beach in the early morning.

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Ned's mother, Susan Hauer, once counted 50 great blue herons on the flats. It looked like a convention, he jokes.

And Susan says she has marvelled at the fluorescent green wings of a lunar moth as it rested on the window sill.

Ned's father, Bill Zimmerman, was offered \$1 million for this island more than 10 years ago, but he wasn't interested. He says you really can't put a price tag on an island that has intrinsic value to the community and his family just the way it is.

"We never wanted it to be developed, which is the only worth for some people. We really wanted to make sure (that) down the road, it is kept as natural as possible."

So the family approached the Nova Scotia Nature Trust to see what they could work out.

The couple bought the 120-hectare Great Island and the adjacent Selig Island more than 30 years ago. The nature trust hopes to own 20-hectare Selig



An aerial view of Selig Island, near Port Medway, on Nova Scotia's South Shore. In the background is Great Island. (N.S. Dept. of Natural Resources)

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Bill Zimmerman



A small island borders a channel on the eastern side of Great Island. (IRWIN BARRETT)



Calm waters reflect a clear sky in Medway Harbour. (BILL ZIMMERMAN)

IN NATURE WE TRUST

- Less than five per cent of Nova Scotia's 10,000 kilometres of coastline is protected.
- 95 per cent of coastal property in Nova Scotia is privately owned.
- That coastline is often sought after by real estate agents, developers and home owners wanting to build a second home.
- The coastline is important because it supports diverse habitats

Island. It has launched a \$225,000 fundraising campaign to permanently protect both islands.

And while the Zimmermans still own Great Island, a conservation easement will mean the use of the land is permanently restricted.

The islands have a rich history. The Mi'kmaq held ceremonial salmon feasts there. Seven wells mark the remains of homesteads, a sheep farm and a logging camp on Great Island. A crumbling chimney marks the site of an Edwardian fishing resort called the Tuna Inn.

"It was a spot of some note, hosting some fancy events," said Bill. Zane Grey, the noted writer of Westerns, frequented the inn.

Today, local families still enjoy outings to Great Island and camp on its shores, leaving nothing behind but their footprints.

The island was not inhabited — at least by humans — when the couple moved there in July 1973, right after Bill gave up his job teaching engineering at a community college in Washington State. Today, the couple lives in Wolfville, where Bill is a town councillor, and the couple are active in the community, theatre and environmental efforts.

"Some people accuse us of being back-to-landers," Susan says with a laugh, but she says they never considered themselves hippies. "We were never cool enough to be hippies."

Life on the island was a challenge, but it was also rewarding. They brought everything from the mainland in their custom-made dory, including basic food supplies and materials to build their home, then hauled their purchases up from the beach to the northwest corner where they made their home.

When they first arrived, the dory wasn't finished, so the couple bought an inflatable boat from Canadian Tire. It had aluminum oars with plastic paddles.

They pitched a tent for their first few nights, then put together the geodesic dome they had designed. It is 10 metres in diameter, and they hoped it would last about seven years. It is still standing.

They built a little cabin inside the dome, using boards from an old camp. They kept warm with a wood stove, had beds in the loft and used pallets and cable spools that washed up on the beach for tables. They even had a garden in the dome that allowed them to pick cherry tomatoes in December.

such as coastal wetlands, tidal flats, coastal islands and estuaries.

- Great and Selig islands have 141 hectares of coastline including sandy beach, rocky shores, sheltered bays and coastal forests.

- The Nova Scotia Nature Trust has permanently protected more than 1,600 hectares in Nova Scotia. Eleven of those 30 properties are coastal.

A trip to the mainland was an event that took planning.

"I remember one of our first stunning disappointments," Bill says.

They wanted to see a movie in Liverpool so they got in their dory and rowed over only to find it was cancelled because hardly anyone showed up. They glumly rowed back home.

Those visits were a time to run errands, get the basics, such as milk and eggs, do laundry and make the essential trip to the library in Liverpool. They still remember how crushed they felt the day they arrived to find it closed because the librarian had a cold.

After two years in the dome — they house-sat on the mainland in the winter — they built a house. The 3 1/2-storey home sits on just a small corner of the island, leaving the other 95 per cent untouched.

"Our raison d'être was to be self-sufficient, energy-independent," Susan says.

Propane and wood provided heat and energy, and kerosene lamps provided light. They had no electricity until 1982, when they erected their first windmill.

They lived on the island full time for the first three years of Ned's life, beginning in November 1985. It was constant work, "but it was balanced by the richness of life that was there," Susan says. Ned learned to count by stacking firewood for the winter.

"The closeness to the natural world is phenomenal," she says. It could be wearying, but the young couple had energy. "We embraced life and took it on with gusto."

In 1989, they moved to Honolulu so Bill could get his master's degree in political science at the University of Hawaii, but they returned to the islands in the summer. In 1991, they moved to England, where Bill pursued post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics, returning to the islands when they could.

In the fall of 1993 — when Ned was in the public school system and the prospect of leading a "normal" life loomed ahead — the seven-year-old told his parents he wanted to spend one last winter on the island.

"It kind of felt like my place," Ned says.

For some kids, it's a tree house; for others, it's a fort in the woods. "For me, it just happened to be an island."

He remembers loading his little sled with logs he and his dad had cut from dead trees that had fallen to the ground.

"There's something very satisfying in using water that you haul by hand, eating food you carried up yourself from the beach. You enjoy everything that bit more when you've put so much work into it. You relish experiences out there more."

Now, with his 23rd birthday just days away, Ned says it is comforting to know that no matter what financial straits he may find himself in, the island will be protected even if he must someday sell it.

"It will be protected as a wilderness area, which means no vehicles, no logging, no property

development. If we have to sell the island, it will still be protected as a natural space — and that's what we treasure it for."

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