



BY BOB BANCROFT

LEGACY OF

Love



A family donates land along the St. Mary's, and people of diverse backgrounds and skills offer their time to save a river.

Shirley and Sandy Cameron.

Fresh optimism permeates the breeze on the legendary St. Mary's River. A sense of change is in the air. For generations of Atlantic salmon and trout anglers the river holds a long, rich and colourful history; however, something else has brought anglers, residents, families, visitors and biologists to the shores of this renowned river today. It's July 15th, 2006 and as people gather under clear blue skies at the riverside home of Dr. Hardy and Barbara Eshbaugh in Waternish, a feeling of anticipation fills the air. City folks are milling about with the locals—like them, eagerly awaiting a landmark conservation announcement by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.

The Nature Trust is the province's pre-eminent land conservation organization. Since 1994, it has been engaged in the important work of private land conservation, and has recently turned its eyes to the beautiful St. Mary's River. The St. Mary's River Conservation Legacy Campaign is a five-year initiative to protect the most ecologically valuable lands along the river. Working together with private landowners and the local community, the Nature Trust will help to keep these lands "forever wild" for the enjoyment of future generations.

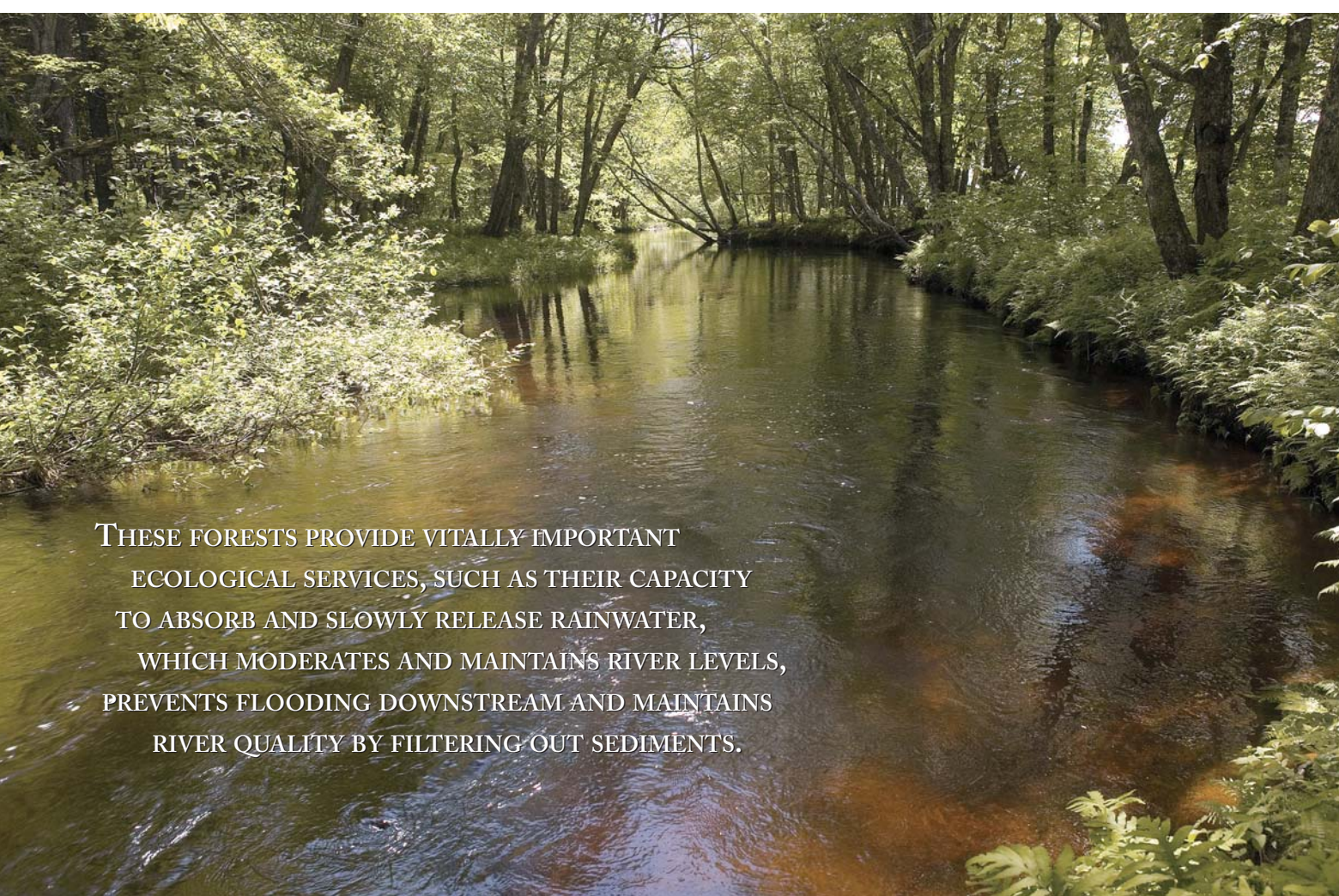
A mere two months after its May campaign launch, the Nature Trust has peaked the interest of the river community by announcing its first major success. Two ecologically priceless parcels of land near Glenelg, Guysborough County, were donated by the late A.M. "Sandy" Cameron and his wife Shirley Cameron. This was cause for high-spirited celebration by all who love the St. Mary's. The 95 acres encompass river frontage, wetland,

Acadian floodplain forest, wood turtle habitat, and old-growth hemlock forest.

Sandy Cameron was a local resident and highly regarded community, business and political leader in Nova Scotia. He was a politician in Guysborough County for over 13 years. Like his father and grandfather before him, Sandy held the Guysborough County riding as MLA, and also served the province in prominent cabinet posts, and as leader of the Liberal party from 1980 to 1986. Sandy's love for the river, combined with a vision and generosity shared by his widow Shirley and their family, led to the land donation. Although Sandy passed away before the land donation was finalized, his wife and family generously completed the gift. The A.M. "Sandy" Cameron Conservation Lands are now part of his legacy to the province he loved.

Surrounded by her family and friends on July 15th, Shirley Cameron spoke of how much this donation meant to Sandy. "The river is the reason for the development of the community," she said. "It is a shame to see it losing its beauty and the life that it previously had. We hope Sandy's gift will stop this decline and allow future generations to enjoy the environment we once had." Sandy's generous gift, fueled by his desire to give back to the community, will live on for the enjoyment of generations to come. His gift serves as a wonderful example of how individuals and families can contribute to a lasting legacy on one of Nova Scotia's most splendid rivers. As land changes hands and pressures to develop it increase, the St. Mary's River Campaign may prove to be an inspiring and engaging option

JEFF ARNO



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PREVENTS FLOODING DOWNSTREAM AND MAINTAINS
RIVER QUALITY BY FILTERING OUT SEDIMENTS.



NOVA SCOTIA NATURE TRUST (3)

Chris Miller, the Nature Trust's scientific advisor, takes inventory of the St. Mary's old growth forests (left) and floodplains.

A tiny wood turtle hatchling has a better chance of survival thanks to the Cameron family generosity and the work described below.

for those wishing to follow in Mr. Cameron's footsteps in keeping the river and its habitats pristine and undeveloped.

As it is for many who live on its shores, the river was close to Mr. Cameron's heart. Dennis James, a family friend of the Camerons, reminisced, "Whether he was driving by it, walking by it, farming by it, partying by it, in it—by choice or accident—on it, or under it when he was bailing out the basements of family and friends, this river gave Sandy his rhythm. It gave him a sense of who he was; how he would lead his life and how he would judge the people he met. He enjoyed those who enjoyed what life in this beautiful community offers."

And this "beautiful community" offers much, to residents and visitors alike. Once a famous salmon fishing river, the St. Mary's is home to diverse species including two species at risk—the wood turtle and Atlantic salmon. The St. Mary's River has some of the last, largest and least-disturbed tracts of Acadian floodplain forests in the province. These forests provide vitally important ecological services, such as their capacity to absorb and slowly release rainwater, which moderates and maintains river levels, prevents flooding downstream and maintains river quality by filtering out sediments. Although massive clear-cuts in recent decades have dramatically affected the landscape, some of the St. Mary's steep banks are still clad in rare stands of old-growth eastern Hemlock. These are great treasures. With less than 1% of old growth stands remaining in Nova Scotia, preserving these forests has never been more important.

The unique natural values of the river flagged the area as a conservation priority. Bonnie Sutherland, the Executive Director of the Nature Trust, noted that "the river offers irreplaceable ecological richness. But," she adds, "it's ecological integrity continues to be threatened by a host of past and present human activities."

Even in the 70s, telltale signs of imminent trouble on the St. Mary's could be teased out of its waters. On the West Branch, water temperatures rose as river channels widened and became shallower. Salmon trapped in pools during low water conditions were exposed to stressful, even lethal water

Loving Care

Here's how a wide variety of people are working to save the St. Mary's:

- ♥ The St. Mary's River Association has been actively engaged in protecting the river for close to 30 years. They have initiated a project to begin watershed level planning and conservation, and have an excellent Education and Interpretative Centre near Sherbrooke.
- ♥ Department of Fisheries and Oceans scientist Dr. Jamie Gibson has been working closely with the SMRA to identify critical population and habitat issues, and to present scientific options for recovery.
- ♥ The Nova Scotia Salmon Association administers the Adopt-A-Stream aquatic restoration project. At the request of SMRA's 250 members, Amy Weston and consulting Habitat Biologist, Bob Rutherford, are developing a plan for the West Branch of the river and overseeing the restoration of aquatic habitats on select tributaries thereon.
- ♥ DNR biologist Mark Pulsifer has enlisted community assistance to study the use of critical habitats by wood turtles on the St. Mary's and to conduct an awareness campaign. Mark and his students have discovered the largest population of wood turtles in Canada.
- ♥ The Biology faculty at nearby St. Francis Xavier University are locking their research sights on aquatic habitat and other management issues along the St. Mary's with an eye to its recovery.
- ♥ Many folks, both local and from abroad, have been volunteering for decades through the SMRA and special projects on the river, and helping through generous financial and spiritual support.

temperatures, as evidenced by the fungal infections they wore on their backs. Low water, widened channels, high water temperatures and other problems emanated from several centuries of land use and abuse that many still consider normal today. Forest clearing to the water's edge for agriculture, logging and other forms of "development" rendered many banks on the St. Mary's susceptible to increased erosion—a condition which today threatens the many diverse species that call the river home.

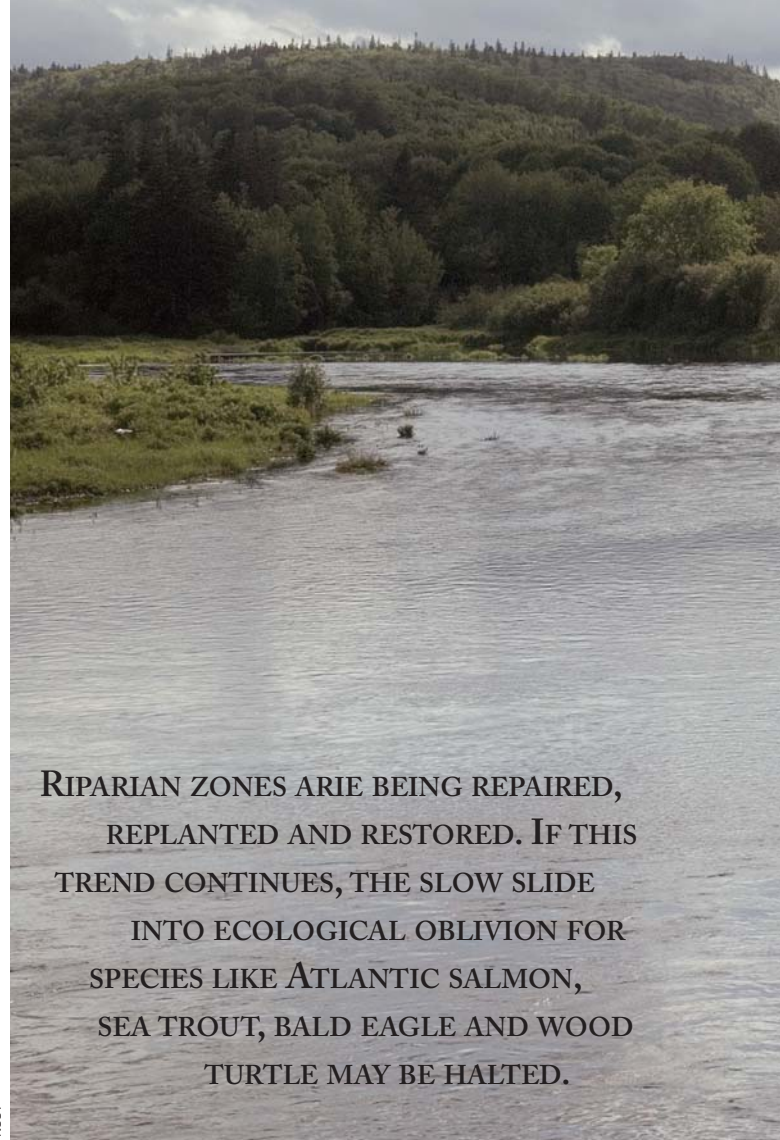
In spite of these impacts, many folks feel new reason for hope. Local residents are quick to acknowledge, "We live here because of the river." After witnessing dramatic deterioration of the river in their own lifetimes, people are ready to see positive change. That kind of sentiment is exactly what makes the careful stewardship of the river a logical step.

The revived hope that is now almost palpable in the St. Mary's area is climaxing with the progress of the Nature Trust campaign; but has been built upon decades of dedicated effort by a host of folks—local residents, anglers, community groups, universities and governments (see *Loving Care*, page 53). New synergies are being created as partners old and new are brought together by the Nature Trust's campaign. Indeed, the emerging cooperation between the Nature Trust and St. Mary's River Association (SMRA) is creating an exciting, new perspective and strategy for salmon conservation in the watershed—a model that could be applied to other wild rivers. A model that provides passionate anglers with a new outlet for their enthusiasm for protecting fish populations and their first love—angling. And a model that provides local landowners and others who love the river with a way of getting involved hands-on in saving the legacy of the St. Mary's.

The Nature Trust's campaign provides a crucial complement to the more traditional, "in-stream" salmon and river conservation efforts. The unique niche of the Nature Trust is ensuring healthy, natural "riparian" habitat along the river's shores through private land conservation. For watershed health, and any realistic hope of bringing back healthy salmon and trout populations, these habitats must be protected or restored, to eliminate the problems of sedimentation, increased water temperature and river shallowing.

The land trust approach focuses first on securing permanent, legal protection of these riparian lands. Tools for protecting land include land donations, bequests, purchase of land, and conservation "easements" which are special legal agreements that keep the land in private hands, but ensure the conservation values of the property are protected forever, even after the land is passed to the next generation or sold.

Scientific planning for the long-term management and care of lands will be undertaken for lands protected through the campaign. Volunteers will help as local stewards or "property guardians" for the protected lands. Educational activities will help people better understand how they can get involved in protecting and stewarding the river, and how landowners can ensure their land uses help, rather than harm, the river and its inhabitants. The campaign's final element involves habitat restoration of the damaged areas in between the for-



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NSST

mally protected lands. Restoration of open fields and treeless areas to native forest will help to create an interconnected "ribbon of green" along the shores that will keep the river wild, ecologically healthy and beautiful for future generations—of people and wildlife—to enjoy.

Two well-known, respected and passionate river advocates have stepped forward to provide vision and leadership for the St. Mary's River Conservation Campaign—Dr. Hardy Eshbaugh and Dr. George Archibald. Eshbaugh is active at national and international levels for the Audubon Society, Atlantic Salmon Federation, and the Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research. He is a professor Emeritus at the University of Miami and Honorary Director of the SMRA. His family have been fishing and hunting on the St. Mary's for 100 years.

Archibald, who grew up near Sherbrooke, is a co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, and is credited with saving a whooping crane population that at one time dwindled to 15 individuals. Recently Archibald, who is also an Honorary Director of the SMRA, became the inaugural winner of the Indianapolis Prize for his outstanding dedication and success in crane conservation.



Nature Trust staff, volunteers and members of the SMRA, together with local residents, biologists and anglers agree that the Cameron's generous legacy, combined with a barbecue lunch, heart-felt presentations, informative nature walks, beautiful skies and a pervasive spirit of cooperation, made the celebration of the campaign's first success remarkable. Beside it all, the river slipped by, glistening in the summer sun. I saw a salmon swirl in the pool beside the field, where a riparian zone was being reforested.

The Camerons, the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, the St. Mary's River Association and their partners are onto something important here. Other conservation-minded folks are talking about protecting their own land along the river and building on the natural legacy preserved for future generations. Farmers, anglers and interested citizens are offering to donate their time and talents. Riparian zones are being repaired, replanted and restored. If this trend continues, the slow slide into ecological oblivion for species like Atlantic salmon, sea trout, bald eagle and wood turtle may be halted.

Together, we can make a positive change on the St. Mary's. With this combined energy directed in their favour, Atlantic salmon populations may soon rebound. The sight of seemingly endless numbers jumping in Silver's Pool could

once again become a joyful reality.

Wildlife biologist Bob Bancroft, a life-long angler, resides in Pomquet, NS. To join the St. Mary's River campaign—as a volunteer, member, donor, land donor or ambassador—please visit www.nsnt.ca or call 1-877-434-5263. 🐟