

## **Province protects priceless property**

### **Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes area protected**

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The province has given protected status to the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area, 1,350 hectares of former Crown land behind Bayers Lake Business Park that was under development pressure. (Environment Department)

A piece of wilderness under pressure from Halifax's urban sprawl will now become the home to only flora and fauna.

The Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area, 1,350 hectares of former Crown land, is being given protected status.

"What a wonderful gift the province has given to the city of Halifax," said Raymond Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax.

Environment Minister Mark Parent made the announcement at a ceremony Tuesday in Hammonds Plains.

The property, featuring wetlands, a series of connecting lakes and stands of old red oak and red spruce, is directly behind Bayers Lake Business Park between Timberlea and the Kingswood subdivision in Hammonds Plains, Mr. Plourde said.

"This area could have easily been consumed within a couple of years," he said. Mr. Parent acknowledged developers have been eager to learn what the government would do with the land. But leaving the area wild "will make Halifax more livable," he said.

The province has committed to protecting 12 per cent of Nova Scotia's land mass by 2015. By adding Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes, the province is nearing the nine per cent protected mark, Mr. Parent said.

He said the area contains an estimated 1.6 million trees that contribute to further greening the province by providing a "carbon sink" — the equivalent of taking 50,000 cars off the road for one year.

Seventeen lakes with undeveloped shorelines are included in the area, which is 18 times the size of Point Pleasant Park.

"It's possible to paddle through nine of them and end up back where you started," said Chris Miller of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. His group has been lobbying for the area to be protected for years.

"If you like to paddle, or hike or just be outside, this is particularly good news," he said. Besides trees and lakes, the tract is home to a small population of mainland moose and a rare Arctic-alpine plant called mountain sandwort.

The importance of green spaces was stressed during consultations in developing HRM's regional plan. The city plans to buy property bordering the protected area to create a regional park.

A government release says protecting the area won't interfere with the proposed Highway 113, a connector for highways 102 and 103 that the province plans to build in the area. The route is north of the wilderness area and an independent report shows it will cross land not worth protecting, the release says.

Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes will likely become as cherished by citizens as Point Pleasant Park is now, Mr. Plourde said.

Even from downtown Halifax the area can be reached taking just one city bus and then "it's like you are in the hinterland," he said.

For more information about the province's 34 protected wilderness areas, visit [gov.ns.ca/enla/protectedareas](http://gov.ns.ca/enla/protectedareas).

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