

COMMENTARY

Advocate for mainland moose

Industry, economic agendas clash with protection

MACKENZIE KORTHALS

The Nova Scotia government has historically failed to implement the necessary procedures and systems to protect species at risk in the province.

The proposed Higgins Mountain wind farm project serves as another illustration of the systemic shortcomings within our province's species protection laws and regulations, which have proven ineffective and lacking in the necessary enforcement mechanisms.

On May 4, 2023, Tim Halman, the minister of environment and climate change, granted approval for the project's environmental assessment. Subsequently, in January, Justice Timothy Gabriel deemed the minister's decision to approve the project as "reasonable" following a judicial review in the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia.

At first glance, the project itself may seem like a significant step forward for Nova Scotia, a province that still relies on the burning of coal to meet 52 per cent of its energy demands. Yet this is not the whole picture.

The proposed project area happens to coincide with the essential habitat for the mainland moose, listed as endangered on the Endangered Species Act registry. Additionally, the Nova Scotia moose recovery plan states "the availability of suitable habitat is critical for maintenance of optimum individual physical and reproductive condition and population productivity."

The plan calls for more core habitat protection and connectivity, both of which will be disrupted by implementing a large-scale industrial wind farm. The impact assessment and moose recovery plan have identified Higgins Mountain as an essential core moose habitat, with the project site hosting a moose population for at least a portion of the year.

The court case on the matter argued that the minister's decision to approve the project was unreasonable based on the information provided, with the additional arguments that the conditions and recommendations under the approval were insufficient to protect the moose population.



Higgins Mountain, west of Folly Lake in the Wentworth Valley area, is a prime mainland moose habitat. GREGOR WILSON

This is not the first time industry and economic agendas have clashed with environmental and species protection; it has been an ongoing issue in our province. Look at the *Bancroft v. Nova Scotia* cases regarding the Endangered Species Act and the Owl's Head Park controversies.

The first case was a historic ruling that found that the natural resources minister had repeatedly failed to fulfil statutory duties under the act, including requirements to identify core habitat and implement recovery plans for species at risk. These failures included shortcomings around the interpretation and review of the "core habitat" for the mainland moose and inability to implement recovery teams and plans for many other species in a timely fashion.

The Owl's Head case is another example in which development agendas were considered before environmental protection. The park had initially been included in a list awaiting enhanced protection. However, it was quietly removed when a developer proposed the construction of a luxury residential area and a golf course on the site. After a lengthy court case, the site was officially designated as a provincial park.

Although these cases represent victories in the name of environmental protection, they would not have had the same outcome with-

out sound decision making based on evidence and the work of individuals who cared.

When it comes to the mainland moose, we must draw upon these cases and advocate for change; we cannot keep letting endangered species be put on the back burner.

What should our priority as a province be? And who gets to decide, and what evidence should be considered?

Wind projects are generally good, but are they still beneficial if they come at the cost of ecological integrity and biodiversity loss? I am all for the development and intensification of wind energy in Nova Scotia. However, the impact assessments and site designation requirements should be more rigorous.

Nova Scotia boasts a large capacity for wind power production. Its geological position on the continental shelf and world-class wind speeds present a tremendous opportunity to develop wind power on and offshore.

Yet decisions on where these projects are placed must be based on sound evidence and proper community engagement to ensure there is a balance between ecological preservation and economic incentives.

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