

Comments *on Northumberland Today* report on the West Headland, 7/17/2013

1. The Hole on the Headland

It is difficult to reconcile the comments of the Director of Public Works with the conditions that existed on the headland.

The reported comments were "The junction of the west harbour breakwall and the beach/headlands had a hole about 14 feet deep and 20 across, he said. Silt was pouring into the harbour causing it to fill up, he said."

The filling that created the south end of the headland in 1992-3 left a space of possibly 20 feet between the end of the fill and the south breakwater. The result was an inlet from the harbour, roughly rectangular in shape, and bounded by the rocks of the breakwall on the south and west, and the end of the fill to the north. In high water years the waters of the harbour filled the inlet, while in periods of lower water rocky pools were left, surrounded by rocks and rubble.

The area proved to be a mecca for waterfowl that favoured shallow waters, and a refuge for shy or less common water birds in times (mostly in summer) when the main harbour was very disturbed. For example, Black-crowned Night Herons were regular in summer through 2012, Cobourg's only record of a Snowy Egret was there in June 2010, and in December 2011 a Purple Sandpiper, a rare bird of rocky pools and headlands, spent two weeks there. Equivalent conditions existed nowhere else in Cobourg. Unwittingly perhaps, the fill work had created an unusual and significant natural area.

If there had been a deep hole somewhere in this area it would have been noticed, and at 14 feet deep, hazardous.

The area finally filled was the entire inlet, so by inference that was the 'hole'. But there had never been 'silt' or even sand, 'pouring in'. If sand had been pouring in, why did it take 20 years to impact on the harbour, and why wasn't it noticed earlier? The continued use for feeding by herons, for example, would not have been possible if the area was silting up, nor would the pools themselves have remained. And there is a far more plausible origin for the sand in the harbour.

So in some bewilderment, on September 29, 2012 Goodwin checked the area for some change that had led to material migrating into the main harbour. It seemed essentially unchanged. The inlet breakwalls there consist of large rocks, and there was evidence of minor sand penetration in the interstices between the boulders themselves, but it did not extend far. There was also a certain amount of rubble that had been loosened from the headland fill as a result of persons (teenagers) scrambling down to the water level, but this too was not new, and the pools were still intact.

This condition lasted until November. About that time a truck loaded with building rubble deposited its load in the inlet. The pools were filled.

These matters were outlined in a letter of protest to the Mayor in November last. The Mayor chose simply to refer the writer to staff.

2. The Importance of the Headland

The Town should have been well aware of the significance of this area. The dumping started shortly after a successful meeting of the Ontario Field Ornithologists in Town included field trips on the headland, and the appearance earlier in the year of the proposed Cobourg Parks and Recreation Master Plan which had advocated designating the area as one of a number of proposed 'Nature Parks.'

The Willow Beach Naturalists' submission in support of this proposal stressed (not for the first time) the importance of natural areas, so there had been much recent emphasis on the subject at the time the decisions on the dumping were being made.

The WBFN submission noted:

'Given the increasing pressures on natural environments, it is important that those remaining be preserved wherever possible. Such places:

- ◆ Maintain important natural functions such as protection of ground water, amelioration of climate, provision of shelter, enhancement of biodiversity, and protection for unusual plants and animals;
- ◆ Provide rich and ever changing panoramas year-round, from the first coltsfoots flowering, the first Mourning Cloak butterfly drinking fresh sap, the early songs of redwing and Song Sparrow, through to Monarch butterflies at the late aster blooms.
- ◆ Provide educational opportunities, and opportunities for both quiet walks in tranquil settings, and more invigorating experiences in more bracing weather.
- ◆ Provide all of this free! The usual costs of parkland; of manicuring and mowing, tilling and fertilizing, the need to allocate manpower and resources, are largely unnecessary, and the attendant pollution of noise and emissions is largely avoided.

The surveys for the Parks Plan found much support for recreation in a natural environment. While 63% of respondents favoured Walking over all other activities, below that 'catch-all' category came Nature Hiking (48%) and Nature Observation/Bird watching (37%), surpassing all the remaining 44 activity categories listed.

Not all natural environments are equally productive. The headland was particularly rich because, over the 20 or so

years it had been left largely undisturbed, it had developed into a mature 'old field' plant community.

'Old fields' are relatively common, and in the past there has been a tendency to denigrate them, because they are products of human activity, and some of their flora is alien to this country. More recently they in turn have come under pressure, and their importance has now generally become recognized. The indigenous natural areas remaining are too rare to assure the important ecosystem functions we ultimately depend on, and old fields and similar areas have assumed this important role.

The headland is particularly important because of its diversity. On Goodwin's September 29 visit to assess the area, he wrote: 'What was left untouched was exhibiting many of the things that make natural areas so popular. Late bird migration was heavy, so the trees and shrubs abounded with birdlife. Late asters and goldenrods were still blooming, and butterflies were everywhere. Out of curiosity I paced out an area south of the fill zone of roughly equivalent size, and started counting. I found seven different kinds of butterfly, including Monarchs, which are under threat, and a Buckeye, a rare visitor from the U.S. I identified 43 different kinds of plants, not counting the trees and shrubs, and the plants near the path differed from those away from it, and the plants in the moister areas were different again. All this at the end of September, when many of the spring and early summer flowers are gone without a trace (so my count could be low by maybe 10 or 20 species or more).'

3. Activities on the Headland - 2012.

The first assault on the headland itself was about September 25, when it was discovered that trucks carrying sludge from Midtown Creek were dumping it at the base of the area. Letters of protest to *Northumberland Today* and Council described it: "Now deep wide ruts and mud have replaced a walking path from the boardwalk to the West Headland, and

a huge pile of slimy charcoal-colored sludge has settled over grass, wildflowers, and habitat for some birds and animals on the headland..... A tire sticks out, pop cans, broken glass, etc. are scattered over it or partly sticking out --- It could easily be mistaken for a dump." The dumped material occupied roughly the northern half of the headland.

Council was more concerned about the lack of notice given than the dumping itself, but gave assurances that the material would be moved elsewhere as soon as it dried out, and the area would be restored to its former condition.

This was followed in November by the initial filling and the letter of protest described above.

The letter to the Mayor elicited a reply from the Marina Manager, saying that the area was entirely man made and not a natural land form, and further that it was subject to erosion and did require a certain amount of maintenance and remedial work, which would result in the disruption of the vegetative growth from time to time.

This was alarming. The headland had survived 20 or so years without any help from the Town, but now it apparently needed periodic work to do so. It seemed that any rehabilitation could be negated by 'maintenance and remedial work' of an unknown extent, and hence uncertain impact. This resulted in a second letter to the Mayor, requesting that Council consider designating the area as a natural park, at least on an interim basis, to give guidance and direction to staff.

Although the letter concerned policy issues that could hardly be dealt with by staff, once again the Mayor chose simply to refer the writer to them.

4. Activities on the Headland - 2013.

It was 2013 before further developments occurred. In exchanges with the Director of Public Works Goodwin heard of the plan to reseed the area as rehabilitation. Concerned about the potential impact of Crown Vetch, a seriously invasive alien known to be present on the headland, and the five years that had proved to be necessary before 'old field' conditions had become established following the previous bulldozing of the area, Goodwin tried to suggest alternatives that might be more successful. These were ignored, but in the course of this the Director also said that the west pier (the headland morphed into a pier during this episode) would always require some intermittent level of intervention by public works equipment.

In the later spring trucks began carry loads of building rubble down the headland and the inlet/hole was completely filled. There may have been some of the original sludge used, but it seems unlikely, and the latter was finally spread, including the broken glass and assorted junk, during the reseeded. Beyond knowing the grass was a mixture of fescue and ryegrass, and 'wildflowers' it appeared the Town was unaware of the composition of the seeds it had sown.

By July the possible intent of the threatened remedial work became clearer. Harbour dredging started, and the resulting piles of sand – and earth-moving equipment – became a feature of the east shoreline of the headland. Formerly this material has been deposited where it could be used, on Victoria Beach. We're not privy to the plans of the Town. But it does appear that the interventions on the headland subsequent to the filling of the inlet had nothing to do directly with the landform itself, except as a convenient works yard to support the dredging.

It doesn't seem either wise or intelligent to try to create a beach within the harbour, and we know of no discussion of this during the Park Planning. There are issues of water

quality and safety quite apart from the implications of leaving a burden of sand in the already heavily burdened harbour. On the other hand, it is hardly cost effective to move the entire pile twice.

On July 20 Goodwin revisited the headland to assess its condition. There was little to be seen of the planting, except for a thin green 'haze' of tiny grass leaves in a few places. There was a fairly robust array of pioneering aliens showing – the kind of species that usually first dominate bare soils. And there was Crown Vetch, in bloom, along one edge.

The large cell filled with sand still dominated the east shoreline, and the earth moving machine was still present, while the strip of beach leading to it was piled with the pipes used in dredging. More damage is bound to occur when the equipment is finally moved.

The one encouraging feature was that the margins of the area are wider than first thought, with a lush growth of plant life in striking contrast to the bare strip in the centre. So migration of plants into the centre is more likely. However, the time needed further recovery of the area remains very uncertain.

So, almost 10 months after the original insult to the headland much of the area is still bare, the promised removal of the sludge never occurred, and the measure of success for the Town, based on the quote in the article, is now to make it 'look better'. This, from the Director who will be responsible for overseeing the management of nature Parks in our Town.

A quote from the Willow Beach Club's submission referred to above seems amazingly prescient:

'Areas in their natural state can be – and too frequently are – seen simply as 'undeveloped land' and hence 'waste land', or 'eyesores'. 'Reasonable' changes are proposed to make

them more acceptable to the individual's standards, but typically to the detriment of the area's natural quality and its associated wildlife. This dismissive attitude also extends to the uses of these areas: dogs are allowed to run loose, cyclists rut muddy places, trash and cuttings are dumped, and vegetation is cut and trampled. These attitudes and practices are changing, but still exist, both in the community at large, and possibly even among some of those who must make decisions on its behalf.'