

## Lights Out for Canada's Lighthouses

by Mary Gazze

Historic lighthouses owned by the federal government are neglected to the point of ruin, says a senator who is sponsoring a bill that would force the government to maintain them.

"The ones that are operational and unstaffed have been allowed to deteriorate. The buildings are crumbling or leaking," says Senator Pat Carney, from British Columbia, who introduced Bill S-220, An Act to protect heritage lighthouses. "They are in a state of disrepair. Even though Point Atkinson is a national historic site ... it is leaking."

The Point Atkinson lighthouse near Vancouver is not the only one. Fourteen Canadian lighthouses are national historic sites. Some lighthouses are said to have rotting shingles and peeling paint that lets in mould-causing moisture, and crumbling cement.

According to the Heritage Canada Foundation (HCF) and other organizations like the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society (NSLPS), these are cases of demolition by neglect—there is no investment in their repair.

In the early 1900s, Canada had more than 800 staffed lighthouses. Improved technology like solar power or LEDs led to automation of all lighthouses. Many remain operational today, but removal of staff began in the 1980s. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) says only 51 of Canada's 247 stone-tower lighthouses are staffed today. There are lighthouses in every province except Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Barry MacDonald of the NSLPS says that some lighthouses in that province were demolished about two years ago after decaying beyond repair. He says they had become targets for vandalism. They were also a health risk to trespassers because of growing mould.

Mr. MacDonald adds that when these buildings are neglected for too long, the government has resorted to a policy of burning them down.

DFO states that it tries to prevent unauthorized access to lighthouses no longer in use by posting signs and barriers, but that transferring the structure to a community that will staff it is the best way to prevent vandalism.

According to DFO spokesperson Dave Burden, the department has no mandate to maintain buildings that are no longer in use, simply because they may have heritage value. "Our primary concern goes to safety," he says. "If we have a choice between funding a lighthouse that no longer has a program requirement versus search and rescue, we obviously have to put our focus on the highest priorities like search and rescue."

### No Canadian Law to Protect Historic Sites

The Heritage Canada Foundation says Canada is the only G8 country with no law protecting historic sites owned by the federal government. As of 1994, the U.S. counted 611 historic light stations. Today, one in seven American lighthouses over 50 years old is protected. The U.S. National Park Service released a lighthouse preservation manual in 1997 that covers



Rose Blanche Lighthouse, Rose Blanche, Newfoundland  
Acquired from DFO in the late 1990s, the community group Rose Blanche Lighthouse Inc. raised the funds for the restoration and partial reconstruction of the badly deteriorated granite light station dating from 1871. Provincially designated as a Registered Heritage Structure in 2002 for its architectural, cultural and environmental values, it now operates as a local museum.

Photo: Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador

how to deal with specific maintenance problems associated with the structures, including masonry, iron, wood, concrete and lanterns.

Bill S-220 would prevent unauthorized disposal of lighthouses, and requires the maintenance of federally owned beacons. "It will provide a very simple legislative framework that says whoever owns a heritage light must maintain it, and that the public must be informed before it's demolished, burned down, or blown up," Sen. Carney says

The bill passed second reading in the House of Commons in June and is before the Standing Committee of Fisheries and Oceans for review in September. It is the sixth incarnation of the bill, which Sen. Carney says never made it through Parliament because of election calls.

HCF executive director Natalie Bull says lighthouses play an important role in Canada's history as a maritime nation. "Just about every Canadian, whether they live near water or not, would think of lighthouses as iconic structures," she says. "So much tourism material uses lighthouses as a figure that characterizes our coastal areas."

DFO tries to sell the land to other federal departments, the provinces or municipalities once it declares a lighthouse no longer operational. If those jurisdictions aren't interested, the department notifies local NGOs.



Photos: George Plant and John Eagleson

View of the lighthouse keeper's house and garden at the foot of Chantry Island's lighthouse.

### Community Ownership

Dave Burden says communities can purchase lighthouses for \$1 if they use the structures for heritage purposes. But the process can take more than three years. And lighthouses on sparsely populated islands are still threatened, as potential buyers are scarce. Last year, only 11 properties were divested to communities, and the department is working on transferring three lighthouses on the east and west coasts. The communities would then be responsible for the upkeep.

Maintenance costs vary depending on the initial damage, but can average around \$2,000 a year. This is a lot of money for some small communities, says Mr. MacDonald. DFO does not track how much it would cost to maintain a lighthouse, but if there is no buyer for a lighthouse, DFO will not pay for upkeep. "In those instances, eventually nature will have its way," notes Mr. Burden. "We can't save them all."

Barry MacDonald says some communities have breathed new life into lighthouses, turning them into successful museums, bed and breakfasts or other tourist attractions. He says groups are excited once they know this option is available to them.

"What you find is people living in these communities have a real passion for that particular lighthouse," he says. "These lighthouses were responsible for guiding their forefathers safely into port."

### Hope Island Lighthouse, Georgian Bay, Ontario

In 2002 the Huronia Lightstation Preservation Society (HLPS) was formed by concerned area residents committed to conserving and maintaining access to six lighthouses in the

Huron area of southeastern Georgian Bay, Lake Huron. The first project tackled was the ongoing restoration of



Photo: Sandi and Neil Tucker, HLPS

Hope Island Lighthouse, Georgian Bay, Ontario  
Community volunteers have been replacing the shake shingles on DFO's Hope Island lighthouse (1880) in Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, in an effort to preserve the site. The new light tower, constructed by DFO in the 1990s, was installed after the lantern was removed from the wooden tower.

the Hope Island lighthouse located 22 km northwest of Midland, Ontario.

It was in 1880 that the square white wooden tower with attached wooden keeper's house was erected. Over one hundred years later in 1988, DFO installed an automated light, leaving the station without a keeper. The lantern was later removed from the tower and a new light placed on a skeletal tower nearby.

The historic lighthouse was abandoned to the elements. By 2001, after years of neglect, the windows were found broken, the roof leaking, sections of shake siding blown off and the interior littered with garbage.

The HLPS, the Beausoleil First Nation and the Huronia Museum have been working together ever since to restore the light station. In 2004 contaminated oil and lead paint were removed from the site and building, and the keeper's house was painstakingly resingled. It is hoped that a replica lantern can be installed in the future.

Although this huge effort has been supported by DFO—who owns the lighthouse—and the Canadian Coast Guard, the fundraising and intensive labour associated with the project have been the work of community volunteers.

**For more information:**

HCF's briefing on Bill S-220 is available online at [www.heritagecanada.org/eng/news/s220\\_brief.htm](http://www.heritagecanada.org/eng/news/s220_brief.htm) or by contacting the foundation directly.

**Take action:**

To add your voice to the call for this important bill, email your Member of Parliament ([www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca)) or Gerald Keddy, chair of the Standing Committee of Fisheries and Oceans ([Keddy.G@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Keddy.G@parl.gc.ca)), Loyola Hearn, Minister of Fisheries ([Hearn.L@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Hearn.L@parl.gc.ca)) and John Baird, Minister of Environment ([Baird.J@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Baird.J@parl.gc.ca)).

You can send a letter to any member free of charge by writing to: House of Commons, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6.