

Barry MacDonald
Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society



The founding NSLPS members on Sambro Island in 1993. Chris Mills, Patsy MacDonald, Graham McBride stand in front of the Sambro Island lighthouse as the fourth founding member - Rip Irwin - takes their photograph.

In 1983 a storm battered the rocky coast of Cape Breton Island near Ingonish. During the night, the waves struck an old lighthouse and swept it away. The lighthouse had not been manned. The structure had been out of commission for a while, and no one seemed to know its history.

The loss of that lighthouse was a small item in the news. But the story grabbed the attention of Barry MacDonald, who lived in the Dartmouth area. MacDonald is a native of Cape Breton.

"When that lighthouse was lost, I was concerned that we had lost a piece of our history," he explains. "I made a promise to myself to find out what that history was."

MacDonald became a volunteer with the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society (NSLPS). The society got started in 1993 and is one of the most active in the country. MacDonald and other members credit Rip Irwin, who had written a book about the 1785 Sambro

Lightstation in Halifax Harbour—Nova Scotia's oldest lighthouse— with getting it going.



NSLPS President Barry MacDonald at the remote St. Paul Island lightstation, which is located in the Cabot Strait between Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland. Credit: NSLPS

The 1980s and 1990s were dangerous times for lighthouses. Navigational technology was changing, and they were being automated. In Nova Scotia, with its 160 lighthouses, the last light was automated in 1992. (Today, Canada has 600 surviving lighthouses, down from 800 a century ago. Only 50 of these have resident keepers.)

The Canadian Coast Guard, which had authority for lighthouses, was coping with budget cuts. There were no funds to maintain the lighthouses. Many were falling apart. Some were being torn down, burned or vandalized.

That's when the NSLPS realized that something had to be done to protect all lighthouses.

They got behind a campaign for a national Lighthouse Protection Act. The Act would maintain the public ownership of lighthouses and heritage standards. And it would allow non-profit community groups - if they are interested - to take over the care of local lighthouses. Some groups already do this and run small heritage museums or cafés in their lighthouses.

It's the kind of protection that already exists for railway stations: the 1988 Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act.

But even with help from high-profile national supporters—including the Heritage Canada Foundation and Senator Pat Carney as a champion—it is tough work to get the legislation passed.



Barry MacDonald (Pres, NSLPS); Chris Mills (VP, NSLPS and stamp photographer); Nancy Hurlburt, (Assistant Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard) and E.H. (Rip) Irwin (Past President, NSLPS) attend the Canada Post stamp launch, 2007. Credit: NSLPS

The Act has been introduced in Parliament several times. In 2003, it was Senator Michael Forrestall who was its champion. At that time, MacDonald was president of the Society. He spoke in support of the Act before a Senate Committee.

Even with unanimous support, the legislation repeatedly failed because Parliament was adjourned.

The bill passed second reading in the House of Commons in June 2007 and was expected before the Standing Committee of Fisheries and Oceans for review in September. Senator Carney moved to skip the committee hearing and introduced the bill in the House.

While plugging away in support of a lighthouse protection act, MacDonald is working on another initiative. Along with several dozen people across Canada, he is trying to form a national society dedicated to lighthouses. At this stage, they are networking and encouraging support from provincial lighthouse organizations and local lighthouse heritage groups.

The NSLPS is also working to attract younger people to the cause. It takes just one champion in any community to motivate others to get

involved and take pride in preserving their local lighthouse, MacDonald says.

For him, there is no question that lighthouses are special. He feels it is worth the effort to lobby on behalf of this unique form of built heritage.

"This is not just for us. It is for our kids and grandkids. The heritage of our lighthouses connects us with something that came before us?and we want to see it continue."

"We have to be patient."

Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society

<http://www.nslps.com/>

Canadian Coast Guard, List of Lights

<http://www.notmar.gc.ca/go.php?doc=eng/services/list/inde>

A Brief History of Canadian Lighthouses

<http://members.aol.com/stiffcrust/pharos/index.html>

Quebec's Lighthouse Trail

<http://www.routedesphares.qc.ca/en/lighthousetrail.html>