



What price for a soul?

In all the excitement over Newfoundland and Labrador's head-long rush into resource development, the race to more and more offshore oil production, the quest to double and triple the number of IOC-sized mining operations, the concentration on revitalizing the fishing sector, the Hail Marys prayed over forestry, there is one resource we're at serious risk of squandering, if not forever, at least for several generations. I refer, of course, to the province's quintessential brand image: its coastline.

Look to any chapter of Target Marketing's international award-winning campaign for the province's tourist industry, and that magical merger of earth and water is guaranteed to have either a starring or strongly supporting role. Here, it's the foreground for an unforgettable sienna sunset. There, it keeps time for a dialectical tribute expressed in song. It carries the breeze that lifts a line of clothes, and guides skipping urchins along forgotten paths. It is the literal and figurative undercurrent to the province's story, drawing people to the province's shores with unparalleled success.

Yet, from St. John's to Port-aux-Basques, Red Bay to Cartwright, if you consider any of the expanding communities in any port or bay around the province, you'll see evidence of progress encroaching on that sacred space. In picturesque Quidi Vidi, a tiny, sheltered harbour in the middle of the capital city, its once-familiar fishing flakes and stages are increasingly crowded by the shadows of executive homes and condos. Public access is gradually being chiseled away from sections of the 265 km East Coast hiking trail along the province's Avalon Peninsula. Lovely Ragged Beach, in Witless Bay, is targeted for a small subdivision (in the same way a deluge starts with a single drop of water). Even Gros Morne national park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is being considered for a power corridor right of way.

Don't get me wrong. I'm no radical tree-hugger advocating the abolition of hygienic conveniences, retail excursions or commercial activity. I'm delighted to see the province finally freed from decades of have-not oppression. Couldn't be happier about the plentiful employment and economic opportunities. There's an energy in this place that's never been here before. A confidence and optimism so palpable you can taste it on the tongue as readily as the salt tang of the waterfront. And it's all due to grand, glorious resource development. No doubt about it: oil and mining have turned this province around. Naturally, everyone wants more of the same.

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But here's something to consider as we continue down this road: not everything new is likewise improved.

Tourists may appreciate the increased stores and restaurants in downtown St. John's, but they aren't coming here in record numbers because they're longing to view the associated construction activity. Nor are they interested in counting the housing units springing up, weed-like, along Kenmount Road.

Incoming professionals, too, regularly share their thoughts on the importance of our vast vistas. They cherish their experience of the natural world we have here in such abundance. Revere the opportunity to stand in awe on the shores of Black Head and Twillingate, dwarfed by the monolithic ice bergs grounded just a short distance away.

They worship this space so much, in fact, that they're buying it up for their homes and cabins, creating new businesses to merchandise the time-honoured excursion around the bay. The local and foreign companies which hire them, wise in the ways of human resource attraction and retention, similarly covet the windowed offices pointed towards Cabot Tower and points beyond (and really, who can blame them?).

Meanwhile we, we were so grateful to see them come in the first place, were so happy to see them forming emotional attachments to this place (please, please, please let them stay), that we didn't often think about what we were losing. Until the time came when locals, too, realized the richness inherent in ocean views and began competing for what is now claimed as a supposed birthright. Today it seems like everyone is jockeying for water rights, jealously attempting to block the less fortunate neighbours coming behind.

Newfoundland and Labrador is in desperate need of provincial and municipal regulations to protect our most precious resource for the enjoyment of all: locals, visitors and new residents alike. It's time to draw a line in the sand. | ABM

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