

Recently I received two pieces of mail regarding the Natural History Society. One was the draft of a comprehensive member survey prepared by Dan McAskill and the other was a thought provoking paper entitled "The Natural History Society of P.E.I. - A Discussion Paper" prepared by Wendell MacKay. Their timely arrival - just when I was thinking about the role and the future of the Society - prompted me to write this article to put a few more ideas across for contemplation. Both papers obviously had a lot of thought put into them and I think it is encouraging to see questions put forward in regard to the role of the Society. I am just going to put a slightly different slant on things.

The survey and discussion paper dealt mainly with the ways the Society could better serve the public and its members and better meet its mandate. I think, instead, the questions that should be asked by each and every member are "What can I contribute to the Society to help keep it running?" and "What are the reasons I joined in the first place and am I helping the Society to fill these goals?"

The Natural History Society only exists because of the level of interest of its members. It is not an entity in and of itself. It has been abandoned in the past when interest flagged and was started again when interest increased. Once we get past the idea that this Society must exist and it must fill its mandate, we can take a look at whether the Society itself (i.e. the members) want the Society to exist and what part of the mandate they may want to concentrate on.

This is not as easy as saying "Of course the Natural History Society should continue". I view this Society much like a cooperative. Buying a membership does not automatically entitle you to have your needs "served", to be entertained once a month, and to passively receive your newsletter in your mailbox every couple of months. Instead, these things are services offered and, if there is enough interest shown and time committed by the members themselves, you will have the bonus of having a meeting organized or getting a newsletter. It is easy to forget that the Society does not have a staff of people to see to booking rooms, getting newsletters from the printers, or whatever else needs doing. It is we members that do it all.

Everyone should be able to look back on their year of membership to this cooperative club and see that they contributed in some way - perhaps brought cookies to a meeting, written an article for the newsletter, found a speaker for a meeting, or stuffed envelopes. If people find they do not have enough time to contribute they are choosing, at some level, to not receive all the things they have come to expect from the Society.

I would hope that before the fall meeting when the "Discussion Paper" will be discussed and the members surveyed, all of us will take a look at the reasons we joined the Society and what we are willing to contribute. And we should be honest. If the answers to these questions add up to little time commitment to the goals of the Society but rather a monthly evenings entertainment and a newsletter bi-monthly - fair enough. Given enough volunteer time, perhaps the Society should concentrate on its speakers and newsletter - which have been excellent to date.

If, on the other hand, large numbers come forward wanting to contribute to the Society, we could then look at the areas of collective interest and concentrate on those of interest. I feel we should be looking at what we want to be as a Natural History Society and how we can all achieve this together rather than a few volunteers working towards serving the remaining members.