

Solving PEI's biggest environmental problem

Province will consider legislation for buffer zone

BY CINDY CAMERON

Most tourists visiting our province do not suspect that the wonderful red soil which they admire is the cause of PEI's largest environmental problem.

Local conservationists have been concerned about soil erosion and excess sedimentation in waterways for many years. Provincial government is finally listening to their concerns, and will be considering a legislation that would help protect waterways from soil erosion. Many feel that their commitment, however, may not be strong enough.

In 1996, the Government of Prince Edward Island created the Round Table on Resource Land Use and Stewardship, whose members were representative of all prevailing interests, from agriculture and forestry to environmental conservationists. In their report, the Round Table recommends that legislation be amended to establish mandatory riparian buffer zones adjacent to all waterways.

"The (Round Table) report is one of the best reports I have ever seen written," said UPEI Professor Daryl Guignon. It contains a consensus of interests which are often in opposition. Many farmers oppose buffer zones since they may cut into land now used in production. Smaller crop yields mean less profit. Still, the issue cannot be ignored.

"Soil conservation is one of the key problems facing the planet right now," Guignon said. Legislation regarding buffer zones has become one of the most contentious issues regarding land use on PEI.

A riparian buffer zone is an area of vegetation adjacent to streams and lakes. Ideally, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, the

zone should be between 10 and 30 metres wide, and consist of grass, managed (selectively harvested) forest, and mature forest. These areas stabilize stream banks and decrease sediment runoff, thus preventing excess sediment from entering waterways. The buffer zones also act as a filter for absorbing materials which can be harmful: nitrates from fertilizers, pesticides, and bacteria from manure.

According to UPEI's Dr. Donna Giberson, the lack of buffer zones can be deadly for many species.

"Many fish lay their eggs in the gravel [at the bottom of streams]," Giberson said. "If sediment covers the gravel, then no oxygen can reach the eggs and the fish eggs smother."

According to the PEI Atlantic Salmon Federation, studies on the West and Wilmot river systems show a direct correlation between egg mortality and sedimentation; with greater percentages of land involved in agricultural use, the survival of fish eggs decreases. Sediment can also smother the aquatic insects that many fish feed on, leaving a gap in the aquatic food chain.

Giberson also explains that excess nitrates, which seep into waterways in fertilizer runoff, can result in increased growth of algae. When the algae dies at the end of the season, the decomposition uses oxygen. Again, fish and eggs are deprived of this necessary oxygen.

Currently, there is no legislation to effectively prevent this type of pollution. While provincial and federal laws prevent people from dumping harmful substances into waterways, the issue of sediment is not addressed.

"One of the biggest prob-

lems [with excess sediment] is that it is almost impossible to prove," Giberson said. This type of pollution is labelled non-point source pollution.

"You cannot prove where it came from, therefore enforcement becomes very difficult," she added.

If farmers and land own-

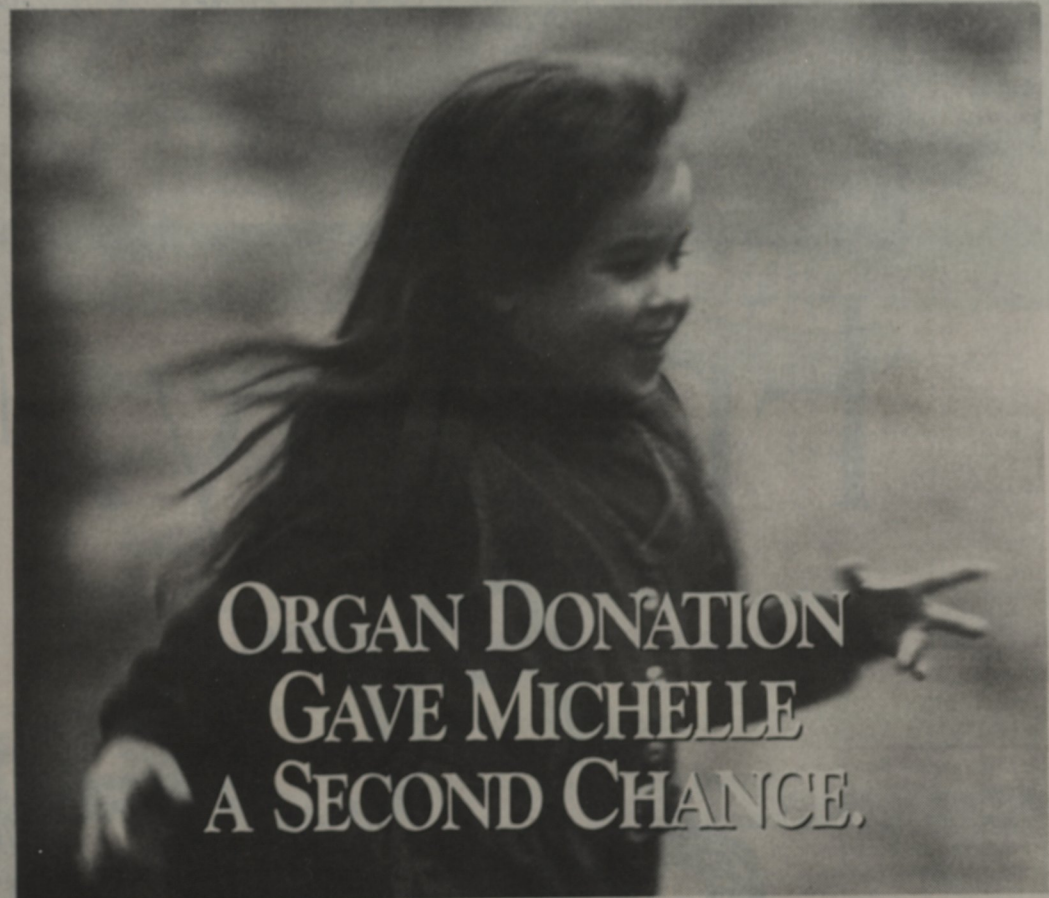
ers were required to have a buffer zone between their operations, whether farming, forestry or construction, the problem would be greatly reduced.

But despite the consensus report of the Round Table, the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Forestry and the

Environment intervened to address government concerns. In their report, they advocate practices which many feel are harmful to the effectiveness of the buffer zone, including clear cutting to the river edge.

Guignon merely wants

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