

A grim diagnosis for our waterways

You don't have to be a biologist to understand the consequences of siltation for marine life

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Most Islanders are well aware of the need to protect the waters that surround them, but an Island biologist has effectively underlined the urgency of this. We'd be foolhardy to ignore him.

Daryl Guignion, biology professor at the University of Prince Edward Island, didn't mince words last week when he addressed a public forum sponsored by the Island New Democratic Party in Cornwall. As a specialist in watershed ecology and protection, he discussed the state of the more than 200 watersheds in the province. "The siltation of watercourses and wetlands, streams, in my mind, is getting worse," Guignion told the forum.

How bad is it? As someone who has patrolled Island streams for decades, silt that used to rise up to his ankles now rises to his knees, and in some areas, to his waist. Waterways that decades ago were solid fish for kilometres in length during spawning runs don't have nearly as many fish today because silt is coating spawning grounds, rendering them useless, he said.

If we're disturbed by Guignion's description, that's no surprise. After all, it paints a dismal picture of the state of our watersheds and is an ominous warning that we can't simply dismiss. And if it shakes government and the residents of this province out of their complacency, then Guignion has provided a valuable service.

Too often those who sound the alarm on the environment talk in a global context or present their concerns in complex terms that alienate average citizens. This tends to paralyze rather than motivate. Guignion's extensive personal experience of patrolling Island streams, and witnessing the buildup of silt is compelling. The image of being knee-deep and, in some areas, waist-deep in silt is alarming. You don't have to be a biologist to understand the consequences of that for our waterways and the marine life in them.

Guignion has offered some practical suggestions for getting out of mire we've found ourselves in. Among other things, he suggests widening buffer zones around waterways and addressing problems created by the Island's culverts and causeways.

If we're smart, we'll act on his advice.