



Ph: 902-838-3351; Email: sea@pei.aibn.com; Website: www.seapei.org

SEA's – Environment Message of the Month:

Riparian Zones: What role do they play in a healthy ecosystem?

It's not often that provincial government programs get a shout out, but it is worthy to note that the PEI Department of Agriculture (DAF) has important programs that more agricultural landowners need to know about. Three such programs: *Agriculture Stewardship Program*, *ALUS* and *Environmental Farms Plans* all provide support to these landowners in achieving more environmentally friendly practices – and that's a good thing for everyone!! Often you will hear watershed groups talking about the 15m buffer zone between row crops and waterways because this area is so important for protecting our water resource; but did you know that DAF's programs encourage, in fact pay, landowners to do more to improve riparian areas?

One of SEA's initial activities is to work with landowners to assess the riparian zone, which includes checking water crossings (i.e. bridges, culverts) for proper functioning. *Riparian zones* are the vegetated 'strips' of land that run along both sides of a river, stream, or tributary and aid in filtering out contaminants, from adjacent land uses. They are the most biologically diverse ecosystems on PEI and they provide important cover for key fish and wildlife species.

Over a 3-year period (2013-2015), SEA assessed ~220kms of the Montague, Valleyfield, Sturgeon, Brudenell, and Cardigan Rivers to determine work needing to be done to improve riparian areas. The top two issues that came up the most were: *improper functioning water crossings* and *siltation* (rivers running red). Imagine if there was a way for landowners to address these important issues; to reduce their environmental impact on our aquatic ecosystems?

Fortunately, there is!! The *Agriculture Stewardship Program* helps agricultural landowners cost share things like: power to remote sites for watering systems, upgrade stream crossings for livestock and farm machinery, installation of fencing to keep livestock out of rivers. The *ALUS* program provides support for riparian zone plantings and will make annual payments to landowners for things like retiring land near the riparian zone, and assisting with planting of native trees and shrubs. Now, it is important to note that these programs can only be accessed if there is an *Environmental Farm Plan* in place which SEA staff can help you with.

We encourage landowners in Eastern PEI to consider these programs and we are here to provide support where we can. In many cases, riparian zones should be expanded beyond the legislated 15m, and planting native trees, grasses and shrubs provide an important, more permanent solution against agricultural runoff. There is a cost, both economically and environmentally, to do something that these programs recognize. SEA is working hard to improve our waterways and this past summer we cleared over 11kms of river and had one crossing removed, but this has little long-term benefit if siltation and collapsed crossings quickly clog up streams again and again. Riparian zones are the last line of defense in keeping streams running clean and providing us with improved aquatic habitat.

As part of its 25th Anniversary, SEA will be hosting a number of community events over the next several months. The first of these will begin with our *1st Annual Winter Frolic Fundraiser* being held at the Harvey Moore Wildlife Sanctuary on March 19th from 11:00am – 3:00pm, and at 6:30pm – 9:00pm for a Nature Hike and Owl Prowl. More info is available on our website and Facebook page. We are also hosting a series of films and discussions on important environmental issues that we hope will get people out and talking. The first film is called *DIRT!!* Despite its name, it is a respectful look at the importance of topsoil and how they are being lost and degraded around the world. Nothing will be more important to preserving the resources needed to feed the world. As we have seen on PEI, it is not just about preserving lost soil, but also about the health of local waterways. *DIRT* will be screened on Friday, March 24th at the Riverhouse Inn theatre, 33 Brook Street in Montague beginning at 7 PM. There will be a discussion on preserving soils on PEI after the film. Refreshments will also be available.

Thank-you for reading our column and many thanks to Island Press Limited for generously supporting us through great stories about our projects and activities, getting word out to the public about what we do, and for dedicating to us this column space. We very much appreciate it!!