

Summary Report:

Coastal Access Workshop on Building Strategies and Relationships for Connecting with the Shore

CZC2025 – Coastal Access Workshop Summary Report, Charlottetown, PEI, June 9-11, 2025



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Introduction

The coast is a public good. A place for work, provisioning, and recreation, it shapes coastal peoples' identity and community, it draws visitors and admirers from around the world, and it underpins many coastal industries like tourism and fisheries. In Atlantic Canada, coastlines have particular importance to Indigenous Peoples, whose traditional and unceded territories often include coastal lands and waters which they have, and continue to use, for traditional food harvest, transportation corridors, and ceremonial purposes. Today they are important locations for exercising Aboriginal and treaty rights and accessing submerged archeological sites (i.e., historical village sites). Elsewhere, coastal areas have been sites of historic displacement and disenfranchisement of Indigenous people and African Nova Scotian communities (e.g., Africville), demonstrating the breadth of histories and relationships that take place where the shore meets the sea. Today, coastal communities and visitors need access to the shore to maintain these relationships, but reaching and moving along the coast is becoming increasingly difficult. A key barrier to coastal access is a lack of public access points, which forces people to cross private land to reach the coast – or to abandon their efforts altogether.

Over 85% of the coast in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island is privately owned. Growing privatization of coastal land, subdivisions by investors, and development of private *and* public coastal land threatens existing and traditional access. Climate change impacts are damaging the coast, access routes, and coastal infrastructure.



Sign posted near a federally owned lighthouse.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

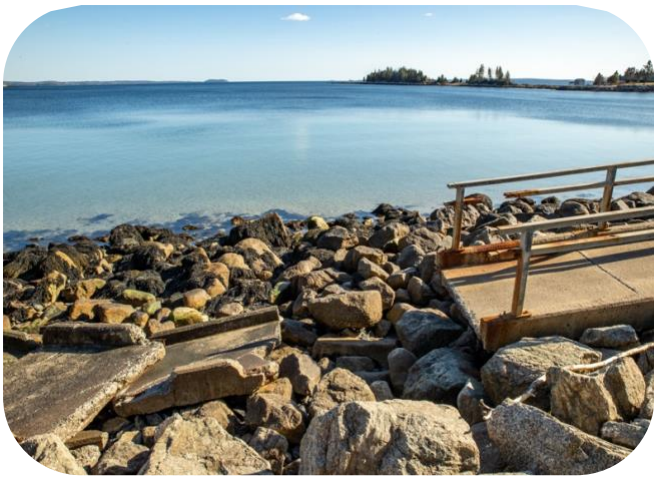
“How do coastal communities and the public maintain and increase access to the coast in the face of growing threats and challenges to coastlines and those who inhabit them?”



Unmanaged access point leading to the coast.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

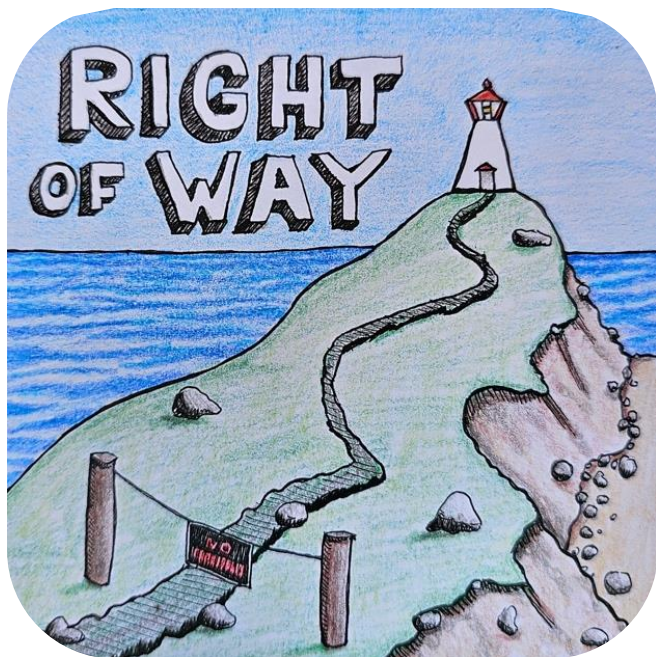
To explore this question, our group of coastal access enthusiasts, researchers, and advocates organized a workshop as part of the biennial conference of Coastal Zone Canada (CZC 2025), held in Charlottetown PEI, June 9 to 11, 2025. Notably, this workshop and a separate talk given by one of the co-convenors were the only coastal access presentations given at the conference. We were joined by 28 participants over the course of two workshop sessions. Participants were primarily residents of Nova Scotia and PEI, some of whom are long-time residents while others are newcomers. They had varied knowledge of coastal access in their communities, ranging from in-depth to just learning. Ten participants attended both sessions, while others split their time between one workshop session and other concurrent conference sessions.

In this workshop, coastal access was defined as the ability of people to view, reach, and move along the coast. Our interest was physical access to the shore – reaching and moving along land and water, on the shoreline, from land to water, and from water to land.



*Unmanaged access point leading to the coast.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler*

Using a combination of presentations and facilitated small group and plenary discussions, we explored the characteristics, extent, mapping, and legal context of coastal access in Atlantic Canada. We also learned about initiatives to promote and increase access – such as PEI’s “[The Island Walk](#)” – and to educate and raise awareness about access from different perspectives. To do this, we drew on the experiences and lessons that were learned from the [Right-of-Way podcast series](#). Workshop participants also shared their own stories – positive and negative – about accessing the coast. This report presents the process and outcomes from this workshop and offers insight to future coastal access work from our group.



Right of Way Podcast. Art by: Laura Bonga

The Workshop

We organized the workshop into two 90-minute sessions with presentations and discussions in both sessions. The workshop structure was as follows:

Part 1: Coastal access opportunities and challenges

The workshop organizers presented about initiatives to promote and better understand access, the legal framework for coastal access, tensions around coastal access in communities, and the conflict between private rights and public good embodied in the coast.

Presentation #1: The Island Walk story: addressing challenges and finding the opportunities for coastal access in PEI
— Presented by Bryson Guptill



Bryson Guptill, founder of The Island Walk, set an inspirational tone with the first presentation, leading the group on an illustrated tour through the evolution and route of this 700 km walk (or bike ride) that uses public shoreline and coastal and near-coastal trails and byways encircling Prince Edward Island. The Island Walk shows what the vision of one person can ignite as it has grown into a community of users and advocates. Islanders are experiencing the Island in a new way; visitors are attracted by the well-documented and organized opportunity to enjoy the Island on foot; and the many small communities along the route benefit from this new type of tourism. By integrating the TransCanada Trail, urban pathways, country roads, and beaches, The Island Walk is raising awareness of the importance of access to open space and especially the coast in an island

province for cultural, health, and economic benefit.

Presentation #2: Coastal access and the law — Presented by Mike Kofahl

The legal context of coastal access concerns the boundaries of the public and the private shoreline, private property rights, rights and activities of public access, jurisdiction over the coast (who controls or regulates), and rules for securing public access that may exist in the law. Mike Kofahl, a staff lawyer at East Coast Environmental Law, provided an overview of the legal complexities of public coastal access, including statutes that facilitate access, common law tools that could be used to increase or restrict access, and the challenges that private landowners and users face with respect to liability (e.g., trespass).

Presentation #3: Conflict in communities — Presented by Hannah Harrison and Nicolas Winker



*Custom designed trail sign directing public to the trail located on private property. Halifax Regional Municipality (NS).
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler*

People have long used private property – particularly undeveloped private property – to get

to, and travel along, the shore. The routes are established through tradition and informal agreements in communities between local users and landowners. However, changing land ownership (like subdivision and development of coastal property) is upending those traditions. With limited public coastal land in the province, access across private land is an important means for people to reach the shore but is disappearing to new development. In some complex scenarios, private property developments incorporate structures like seawalls which, while frequently legal and helpful to the property owner, can be detrimental to public spaces (like beaches) in front of those structures. These types of changing land uses are often at the heart of conflicts over coastal access, particularly in rural communities. Hannah Harrison and Nicolas Winkler have been exploring coastal access through the stories of people who use or own coastal land through their podcast [Right of Way](#) and powerful photography. This talk discussed the key themes they see emerging from these conflicts.

Part 2: Building relationships and strategies for connecting with the shore

Presentation #4: ‘First steps: building an inventory of public coastal access in Nova Scotia’ — Presented by Patricia Manuel

Knowing the location of coastal access is the first step to managing it. Patricia Manuel presented on a joint initiative of Dalhousie University’s School of Planning and the Marine Affairs Program and Ecology Action Centre to build an inventory of public coastal access in Nova Scotia. Shoreland below normal high tide is public land (with a few exceptions); access along this shoreland is available to anyone wanting to use it.

Getting there is not so straightforward, however. The options are overland via public property, private property, public roads and wharves, or from the water. In Nova Scotia, the vast majority of shoreland property above the high tide line is privately owned – one provincial estimate suggests it is 87% – presenting a substantial constraint to legal coastal access. The aim of the inventory is to locate, quantify, and characterize

public access via public land and points of access at the shore. Students in the School of Planning and the Marine Affairs program have been building the inventory county by county, beginning in 2023 with developing the inventory methodology and testing it using the Halifax Regional Municipality. They have since completed the inventory for four additional counties and refined the methodology. ArcGIS Pro is the primary tool used to conduct desktop mapping using data from databases available from the provincial and municipal governments, community groups, and non-government organizations, and to interpret satellite imagery on Google Earth. Conversations with local coastal users and municipal councillors, along with field checking, helps to identify new locations and confirm locations that are ambiguous on the satellite imagery. The inventory can inform strategies to protect and increase public access; identify the distribution of equitable and inclusive access for all demographic user groups to access the shore; identify risk to access from climate change impacts; and identify potential conflicts between coastal access and coastal habitat and species protection.



Informal trails run across undeveloped coastal property. Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

Presentation #5: 'Private right vs public good: coastal access and communities'

— Presented by Hannah Harrison and Nicolas Winkler

Following on their first presentation, this talk built on the theme of community conflict around coastal access by asking how and whether coastal access should be enshrined and protected through policy or practice. If the coastline is a public good, shouldn't access to it be protected as well? Private property ownership and the rights granted to that ownership is a core tenant of colonial land management systems, and yet property owners are often villainized when they make (often perfectly legal) changes to their properties that impact access for the broader public. What balance might be struck to protect the rights of private property owners and the benefits of the public simultaneously? This presentation offered several examples where private property owners and communities worked together to maintain access. It also raised questions about rights vs responsibility and whether it is time for a coastal ethic – or code of conduct – to be created.



Fence erected along a popular coastal path at Chebucto Head near Halifax. Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

What we learned

Both workshop sessions began with a few warmup exercises where workshop participants were asked to respond to questions via the live on-line polling tool Mentimeter (www.menti.com).

To get a sense of participant experiences with the coast, we asked several questions, to which participants could provide real-time, anonymous

answers that appeared on a screen in front of the audience.

Question #1: Why do you value getting to the coast?

Workshop participants shared many ways in which they value getting to the coast, from activities like swimming, walking the shore, and playing to more reflective experiences, like “making memories with family”, “peaceful contemplation of nature”, and finding calmness and wellbeing through the “sound of the waves” and in the “peace and beauty” of the shore, and “the vastness of the Earth”.

Question #2: How do you get to and/or move along the coast?

Participants indicated many ways of accessing the coast, using parks, wharfs, or private land; getting there by car, or biking, or kayaking; and, once there, walking the shore.



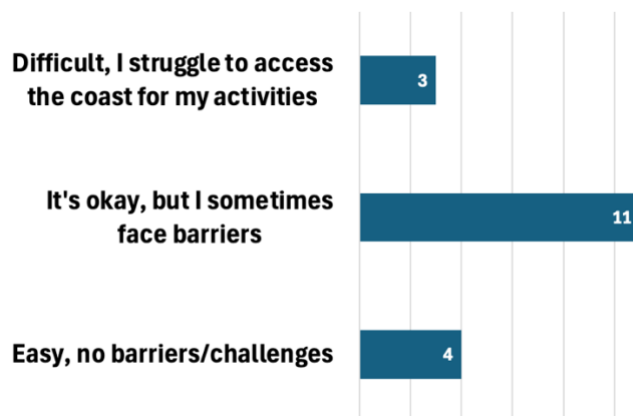
In our second session, participants were asked about the frequency and ease of their coastal use. We found that workshop participants were frequent coastal users, with most using the coast at least once a week.

Question #3: How often are you using the coast?



However, despite using the coast frequently, most of the workshop participants reported that they encountered barriers to coastal access. While for most this was not all the time, for a few it was a regular struggle. Still, some had no difficulty with accessing the coast.

Question #4: How easy is it to access the coast for what you like to do?



Small Group Discussion Questions

In both workshop sessions, we worked in small groups to explore topics about coastal access more broadly, guided by five questions over the two sessions.



Workshop session (Patricia Manuel presenting in red).
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

Synthesis of Question #1: How are you seeing coastal access change in your area?

Feedback focused on the growing population or growing popularity of easy access points. This seemed to result in cascading problems, such as conflicts between users, conflicts between users and property owners, or a lack of understanding and education about the rules of coastal access. Additional pressure from growing use also exacerbates limitations at some access points, such as when there is only one access point to a particular access site, resulting in limited entry and exit capacity. Some participants observed that changing demographics and cultural practices (e.g., new Canadians or more broadly newcomers visiting the coast in very large groups) have created pressure on ecosystems due to intensified use.

Another challenge identified by participants was that existing access only served a limited number of desired activities. For example, participants reported few swimming opportunities or beaches being unsuitable for swimming due to the nature of the beach substrate (i.e., too rocky) or shoreline armouring making entry and exit difficult. Similarly, a mix of informal and formal access means that rules or arrangements with private landowners are often not apparent to new or transient users, creating a “culture of access” that one must have insider knowledge to know about. Informal information sources such as online forums, apps (e.g., All Trails), or message boards (e.g., Reddit) can sometimes have out-of-date,

inaccurate, or confusing information. Physical signage in coastal access locations also sometimes presented problems where the signage was unclear or did not clearly mark boundaries between public and private lands.

Many participants discussed the challenge of quality of access, or lack thereof. ‘Quality of access’ means the suite of infrastructure, accessibility accommodations, and other aspects that make a coastal access site usable to a broad range of people given their practical needs. Examples of this included the challenge of a lack of parking or public transportation to available access points. Similarly, where parking or access points are available, there may be prohibitive fees to use them. A lack of adequate washroom facilities was also raised, as well as access points that are not accessible to mobility devices (e.g., no wheelchair ramps). The presence of litter or other hazardous or unappealing debris (e.g., lost fishing gear) is also a challenge, as are issues – real or perceived -- of water quality in urban access areas (e.g., Halifax’s Northwest Arm). Water testing is important information and could confirm safe conditions, but lack of testing is a gap.



Privitization along the coastline, building of a sea wall.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler

The transfer of public lands to private hands was raised as a concern. For example, we heard concerns about coastal property owned by public entities (i.e., the province), which previously provided access, but which is now being sold very cheaply to private interests, thereby limiting access in the future. Similarly, the development of privately-owned coastal properties can create tension around access, and even if stipulations are in place to protect access (i.e., PEI’s rules), a lack

of clarity on how to interpret those stipulations can create problems.

Finally, the impact of natural phenomena (e.g., storms, flooding, and erosion) made worse by climate change are causing access problems. Storm surge and rapid erosion were observed to be degrading or eliminating previous access. One person raised the issue of less ice forming in inlets or other places that provided seasonal access between land masses where there is otherwise no road access.



*Seasonality has an impact on coastal access.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler*

Synthesis of Question #2 & #3: What kind of information about the law related to coastal access would you find helpful if you have to navigate an access issue?

What strategies or actions are being used in your area, or that you are aware of, to maintain, improve, or protect coastal access?

With respect to legal questions, one of the main points of interest was around personal risk or liability. For example, one person asked, “What are the risks to me if I use private land to get to the coast? What is my legal status if I go onto someone else’s property?” A general sense of not understanding the existing law or what legal structures already exist came out of this discussion.

Key strategies and actions that were identified as valuable or effective in facilitating coastal access or were desired as a way of improving access included improving informational signage,

establishing clear routes for access, establishing educational materials that showcased the history of access use in particular areas, and identifying sources of pollution or other factors that degrade quality of access. For future actions, some groups suggested ‘branding’ coastal access through the use of catchy slogans that help educate the public about access, or using policy means such as designating access zones through various zoning or planning tools.

Some participants from PEI discussed how social media was assisting in how people learn about and navigate coastal access. For instance, a Facebook group about coastal space updates on trail conditions. These examples were related to what was observed as a growing walking culture in PEI, which is slowly changing the conversation more broadly about coastal access in the province.

Others raised the discussion of how the power of some user groups helps keep access, though not always at the benefit of all. For example, in New Brunswick on the Acadian peninsula (Miscou Island) access was modified to prevent cars from driving on the wetlands but ATV access was retained, highlighting the power of some interest groups.

Tourism also came up as a way to improve access. For instance, increasing access points to the coast can help to reduce pressure on coastal spaces and increase recreational opportunities. This is key in supporting tourism related economic development, particularly in smaller or rural coastal communities. However, some participants pointed out that tourism-driven access development can create additional conflicts. For instance, infrastructure development may be geared towards promoting tourism activities at the expense of local residents, causing them to feel left out or excluded from coastal access planning. One solution proposed would be to provide an area pass for year-round residents to avoid steep increases in access fees.

In cases where private developers are developing the coastline, some participants suggested requirements to notify around loss of access or require access to be accounted for and maintained in new developments. On the flip side of this, some participants pointed out the responsibilities

of coastal users to appropriately and responsibly use access.

Finally, local solutions to hyperlocal changes in access were also mentioned. One participant highlighted an example of community adaptation at the hyperlocal scale: when a newcomer to a coastal community blocked off a traditional informal access point, another longstanding resident allowed the community to access via their property (to the exclusion of the aforementioned newcomer).



*Crescent Beach, Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia.
Photo by: Nicolas Winkler*

Synthesis of Question #4: What tools or strategies should (or could) we be developing to support coastal access?

In discussing how to support coastal access, one aspect raised was the desire on both ‘sides’ of coastal access conflicts to be heard and understood. Participants made suggestions as to approaches or tools that could facilitate understanding and create avenues for improvement.

- Establishing a coastal ethic or widely-used set of rules or norms that would help improve user behaviour/impacts on coastal access areas. This idea was inspired in part by “Leave No Trace” principles in the hiking community.
- Mapping or establishing an “Atlas of Access” for particular regions/provinces. An example of this is the Coastal Access Guide published by the California Coastal Commission.

- Developing a toolbox for coastal access conflict resolution for use when conflicts arise between coastal users and developers or property owners. The toolbox could also include points to address conflicts between different types of users (e.g., dog walkers vs hikers).
- Policy solutions to incentivize property owners to retain, maintain, or establish coastal access. Suggestions included policies that limit liability to property owners if they provide public access, tax breaks, governments retaining coastal lands for public use, and better information.
- Developing something like a coastal access app (inspired by the Wild Open Water swimming app that one participant demonstrated) that shows locations and features of coastal access spots.

Synthesis of Question #5: What are your key questions about coastal access moving forward that you would like researchers or policy-makers to address?

Workshop participants identified a wide range of questions related to coastal access. These included:

- What is the definition of coastal access?
- How do seasonal closures of public coastal access roads (e.g., Crystal Crescent in Halifax Regional Municipality) impact the public’s ability to use those spaces in the off-season? Does it become ‘use at your own risk’?
- How can we make accessibility more regular and reliable in coastal access locations?
- For those who use coastal access areas and enjoy collecting items, what are we allowed to take from the coast? Are we permitted to collect trash, glass, or shells? What are the specific rules or regulations around this?
- What are the leverage points or key areas of tension in the discussion on coastal access?
- Where and what is the volume of desired access? What type of access or uses of that access are desired?
- Enforcement – who is responsible for enforcing public access rights or responsibilities? Who to call if problems arise?

- What can people do if they face conflict? Restorative approaches?
- How do property owners see coastal access? What are their perspectives?
- What are the priorities for education? Who is responsible for coastal access education?
- Where are people getting information about access?
- What are routes for efficient education about coastal access?
- What values or means of access are important to the aesthetic value of the coast?
- How do place attachment relationships to the coast and shared values impact access?

Next Steps...

The workshop served as an initial step in establishing a network focused on coastal access advocacy, education, and fostering stronger connections between communities and the shoreline. The insights gained from this workshop elucidate a wide range of questions, challenges, and opportunities within coastal access in a variety of contexts.

- **First international Coastal Access Symposium in Spring 2026**

Nicolas Winkler, Hannah Harrison, and other members of the workshop convenor group are proposing to host the first international symposium on coastal access (virtually) in spring of 2026. The purpose of this free symposium would be to bring experts, advocates, and interested parties from around the world into one virtual space to share information about projects, research, advocacy efforts, policy, and other approaches to understanding, protecting, and maintaining coastal access.

- **Forthcoming paper about coastal access research and advocacy pressing needs**

Linked to the Coastal Access Symposium, all participants in this workshop will be invited to take part in an upcoming study that will survey experts and advocates on coastal access to identify their most pressing information needs and questions. The study will use a snowball sampling method to identify other experts or advocates who were not

at the workshop, but who might be interested in taking part. Anticipated date: May 2026

- **Future coastal access workshops and public information materials**

East Coast Environmental Law will be hosting a public workshop on coastal access law in Prince Edward Island in October 2025, with the aim of informing the development of a PEI coastal access policy or legislation, which the province of Prince Edward Island has committed to. East Coast Environmental Law will also be creating a new resource about coastal access laws for PEI that will be launched during the workshop. The materials will seek to answer important questions raised (above).

Resources

Coastal Access Project:

<https://www.hannahharrison.ca/coastal-access-project>

Ecology Action Centre resources/website:

<https://ecologyaction.ca/>

East Coast Environmental Law Resources:

<https://www.ecelaw.ca/summary-series/coastalaccessinnovascotia>

Island walk Resources:

<https://theislandwalk.ca/>