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A Vision for Ecotourism on the Lower North Shore of Quebec

John S. Hull

Many policymakers argue that the sustainability of ecotourism is dependent upon a principled and proactive supply-side approach to development (Blamey, 2001; Ross and Wall, 1999; Buckley, 1994). In general, discussion of sustainable tourism development over the last two decades has focused on initiatives to develop strategies, guidelines, and indicators that revolve around principles such as:

- holistic planning and strategy-making;
- preservation of essential ecological processes;
- protection of both human heritage and biodiversity;
- development to ensure that productivity can be sustained for future generations (Bramwell and Lane, 1993).

The major challenge for many destinations has been implementing principles to provide a useful way forward—putting theory into practice (Boyd, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the efforts of the Centre local de développement (CLD) on the Lower North Shore of Quebec to develop a small-scale ecotourism industry in the region. The first section of the paper defines the LNS region to provide a context for analysis. The second section analyses the five-year plan for ecotourism development completed in 2002 applying Blamey's (2001) three dimensions of ecotourism—nature-based, environmentally and culturally educative, and sustainably managed—to evaluate how

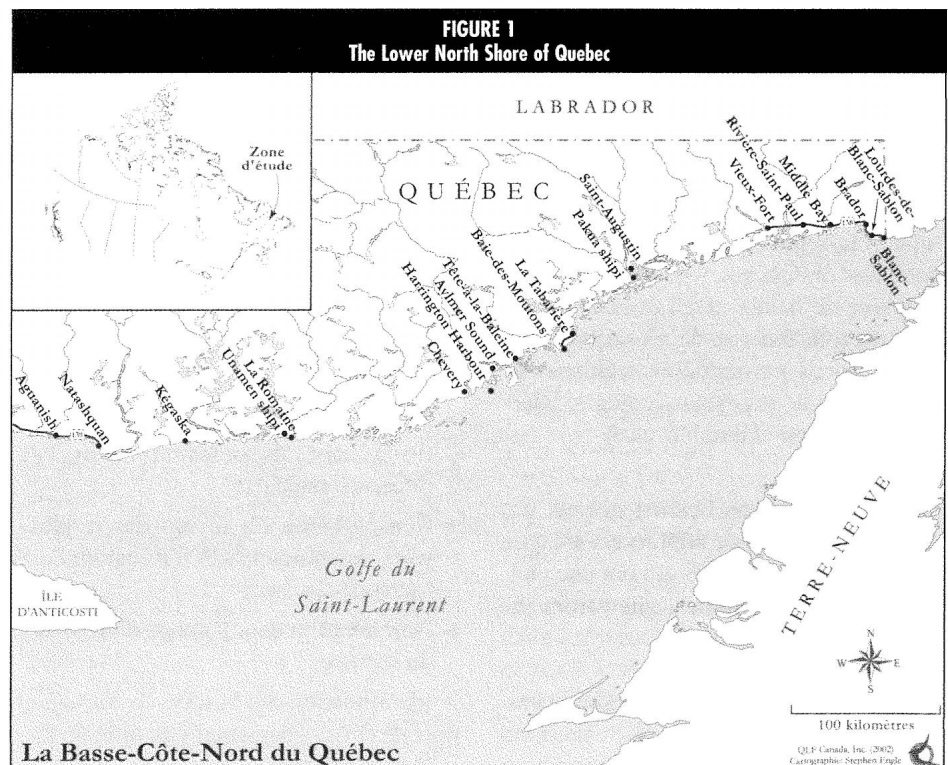
well those concepts have been integrated into the plan. The last section provides concluding remarks and argues that the sustainability of ecotourism in the region will depend on the financial and technical support of public and private agencies in implementing the plan.

Case Study Area

Quebec's Lower North Shore (LNS) is located on the northern edge of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (fig. 1). The region extends approximately 400 km, from Pointe-Natashquan in the west (50°05' N, 61° 44' W) to its eastern limit at the Labrador border in Blanc-Sablon (51°26' N, 57°08' W).

The climate is highly variable with continental and maritime air masses affecting the territory. The average temperature varies from 11°C in summer to -11°C in winter. Summers are short and without frost and last only four months. There is a frequent presence of fog in summer. Annual precipitation totals 1,152 millimetres and the region receives an average of three metres of snow in winter. Sea ice often lasts until May, with icebergs frequenting the coast until mid-July (QLF, 2002).

The LNS is characterized as a drowned coastline with occasional promontories found near bays and rivers, and a string of



islands along the coast with ample evidence of glaciation. The region borders two great geological entities forming Eastern Canada: the Canadian Shield and the St. Lawrence Platform (Blanchard, 1984 : 117). The dominant hydrological feature of the region is the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which marks the southern limit of the LNS. Twenty-two salmon rivers of variable flow also drain the territory. Bédard (1969) identifies two predominant vegetation types along the coast—krummholz (shrubby thickets) and tundra. There are 38 species of land mammals and 25 species of fish have been classified, such as brook trout, northern pike, rainbow smelt, landlocked salmon, and Arctic char in some areas.

The region also has diverse marine fauna and flora. Marine birds total approximately 100,000 birds, with fifteen species as breeders nesting primarily in six migratory sanctuaries established in 1925 by the Canadian Wildlife Service. The largest breeding colony of Atlantic puffins in Quebec is located at the Bradore Bay Sanctuary in Lourdes-de-Blanc-Sablon, with a population of over 20,000 birds (Blanchard, 1994). Migrating shorebirds are also prevalent in the fall and spring, with 150 species of birds visiting the area annually (Nove, 1995). Today, the Gulf of St. Lawrence is a world-renowned site for observing marine mammals with one of the largest summer concentrations on the LNS between Old Fort and Blanc-Sablon (Fuchs and Sylvestre, 1995; Nove, 1995).

Culturally, the LNS has a rich and diverse ethnocultural heritage. Native prehistoric, Paleo-Eskimo, and Inuit archaeological sites up to 8,500 years old are found in the region (QLF 2002). The Montagnais stock who still inhabit the LNS exploit a wide range of plant and animal resources engaging in a subsistence lifestyle by fishing, hunting, and gathering (Blondin, 1984).

European archaeological sites from the 16th to the 19th centuries are also numerous due to an intensive exploitation of marine resources such as seal, salmon, cod, herring and whales. In the 16th century, the LNS was settled each year by hundreds of fish-

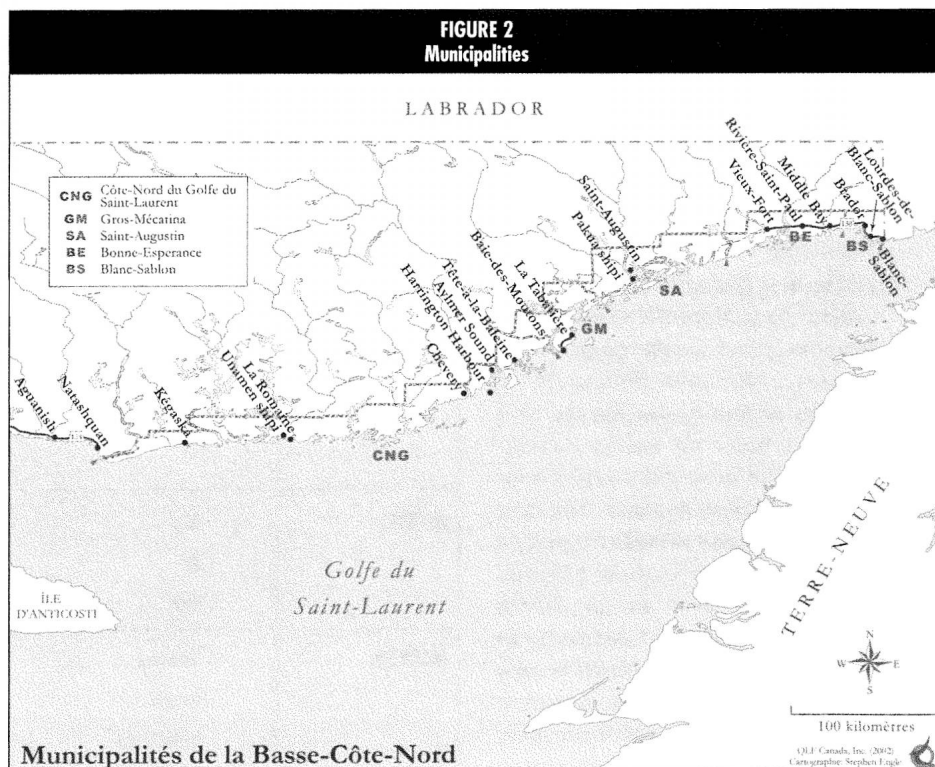
ermen at fishing posts scattered between Blanc-Sablon and Harrington Harbour including the Basques who hunted whales. In the 17th century, the French settled more permanently on the LNS with New France claiming its rights and establishing the Commanderie du Labrador at Bradore Bay. The British Crown did likewise after the Conquest and, during the 19th century, Jersey companies extended fishing activities in the region. Family-run enterprises formed the basis of the local economy. In the 21st century, the cultural traditions are based on the presence of three cultures: the Montagnais, French, and English.

In 2002, the population of the LNS stands at approximately 5,780, spread across fifteen villages and two reserves (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2002). The communities are divided into five political jurisdictions (fig. 2). Demographically, the region has a declining and ageing population with a high birth rate among native populations. English, French, and Montagnais are languages spoken in the region with 50% of the residents unilingual anglophones (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 1999). Formal education levels are low and employment is mainly seasonal.

Economically, the region is poorly diversified, affected by the decline in the fishery with annual unemployment rates of approximately 45.8% compared to 17% for the North Shore and 18.7% for Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 1999). Tourism is identified as a priority for development (QLF 2002).

Traditionally, tourism in the region has been largely controlled by outside tour operators. Since the early part of the 20th century, with the arrival of the Clarke steamship lines in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, cruise ships have visited the region, transporting tourists from destinations such as Quebec City and Montreal. The early forms of tourist services in the region were outgrowths of industrial prospecting, such as forestry (Lundgren 1995). In 1919 as a result of steamship grants from the federal government, regular steamer services to Blanc-Sablon and other ports on the LNS commenced (Frenette *et al.*, 1996).

From 1921 to 1969, the Clarke Steamship Company was to dominate marine transportation in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, offering a fortnightly service during the



summer, transporting passengers, mail, and freight (Whiteley, 1975; Clarke Day Book, 1978). The first ships included the *Labrador* (1921-1930); the *Gaspesia*, later renamed the *North Voyageur* (1923-1950); and the *North Shore* (1921-33) (Franck, 1980). Those ships initially provided modest services, but also contributed to the expansion of trade to Newfoundland (Clarke Day Book, 1978). Even though the steamships were primarily designed to transport cargo, Louis Garnier, author of *Dog Sled to Airplane: History of the Saint Lawrence North Shore*, describes the time spent on the North Shore in a positive light: “One can never forget the fine spirit, friendly atmosphere, and good humour, which have been the hallmarks of our boats along the North Shore. All their passengers felt at home” (Garnier, 1949 : 172).

The scenery of the Gulf and the warm hospitality on the steamships led to the development of pleasure cruises in the region. From the 1920s until the outbreak of World War II, those pleasure cruises, departing every Monday in July and August from Montreal on a circuit of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, stopped on the LNS coast at Grenfell Medical Mission communities as well as the Hudson’s Bay Company posts (Junek, 1937; Franck, 1980). In an entry from the Clarke Day Book (1978 : 54) it was reported:

The scenic splendors of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which had first attracted the Clarke brothers, prompted the new line to develop pleasure cruises from Montreal to many picturesque ports in the Gulf. These cruises... brought thousands of tourists to this region for the first time. Labrador, the unknown country, became more than just a synonym for Polar Regions. The new cruises did much to make the people aware of the work of the Grenfell Medical Missions in the North Country and aided that enterprise in many ways, focusing attention on a region, which proved to be so rich in natural resources, which are now being developed.

After the war, the pleasure cruises were discontinued with Clarke Steamship lines offering cargo and passenger services (Franck, 1980).

In the last decade of the 20th century, the number of visitors to the region on ferry and cruise ships increased by approximately 15% (Transport Canada, 1988; Ministère des Transports du Québec, 1988; Jones, 1991) through marketing campaigns

that offered an “*ecotourism adventure to wild and barren landscapes where the visitor will be seduced by the warm hospitality offered by residents*” (Tourism Quebec, 1995 : 35). The *Relais Nordik* and *Écho des Mers*, based at Rimouski, Quebec, and the *Apollo* based at St. Barbe, Newfoundland, are the major means of transport for visitors to the region in the summer months. Limited road access and the high cost of air travel continue to

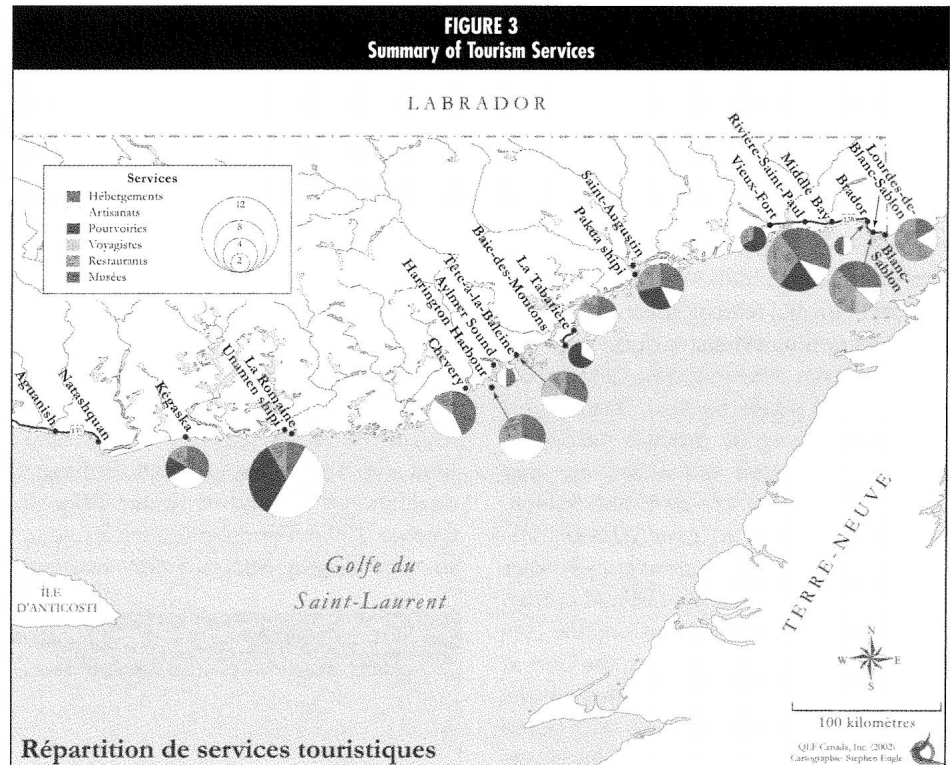


TABLE 1
Sub-Regional Evaluation of Tourism Product, Access and Markets

	Eastern Region	Central Region	Western Region
PRODUCTS	Archaeology Heritage Wildlife viewing	Living history Birding Adventure Cruising	Aboriginal Outfitting Crafts
ACCESS	Boat Air Road	Boat Air Snowmobile	Boat Air New road
MARKETS	Maritimes Ontario United States	Quebec Cruise ships	Quebec

make maritime transport the most affordable means for visiting the region. Current levels of tourism activity are estimated at 10,000 visitors with the majority passing through the eastern sector on their way to Red Bay National Historic Site in Labrador (QLF, 2002; Parks Canada, 2001).

The Lower North Shore Tourism Plan

In 2001, the Comité ministériel permanent des affaires régionales et territoriales (COMART) to the Ministère des Régions du Québec announced a series of directives to respond to the LNS's lagging economy in a sustainable manner by preparing an action plan for economy recovery. The plan identified three priorities for development that include diversifying marine resources, developing a northern berry industry, and the development of ecotourism (Ministère des Finances et Ministère des Régions, 2001).

In 2001, the CLD hired the services of the Quebec-Labrador Foundation (QLF) and a team of consultants to develop a five-year tourism plan for the region. The consultant team was divided into seven groups—Environment, Culture, Economy, Access, Product, Market, and Education. The plan was prepared over a four-month period and divided into two major sections. Local residents participated in each group to assist in strategy development and data collection.

The first section of the plan, the inventory and analysis, provided a summary of the current state of affairs for tourism, an assessment of regional tourism conditions, and presented findings based on 110 combined interviews, surveys, and consultations with residents and industry professionals, plus extensive research by the planning team. Based on the findings, information on available tourism services was organized into a map inventory to assist the CLD and local residents in understanding the distribution of services in the region (fig. 3). The inventory also assisted the planning team in organizing the LNS into three sub-regional divisions for development. The three sub-regions were

chosen as a result of differences in existing/potential products and services, access, and markets (Table 1). Based on the findings, a strategy was drafted for development that integrated the needs of the three sub-regions.

In Section two, the planning team proposed a gradual plan for ecotourism development

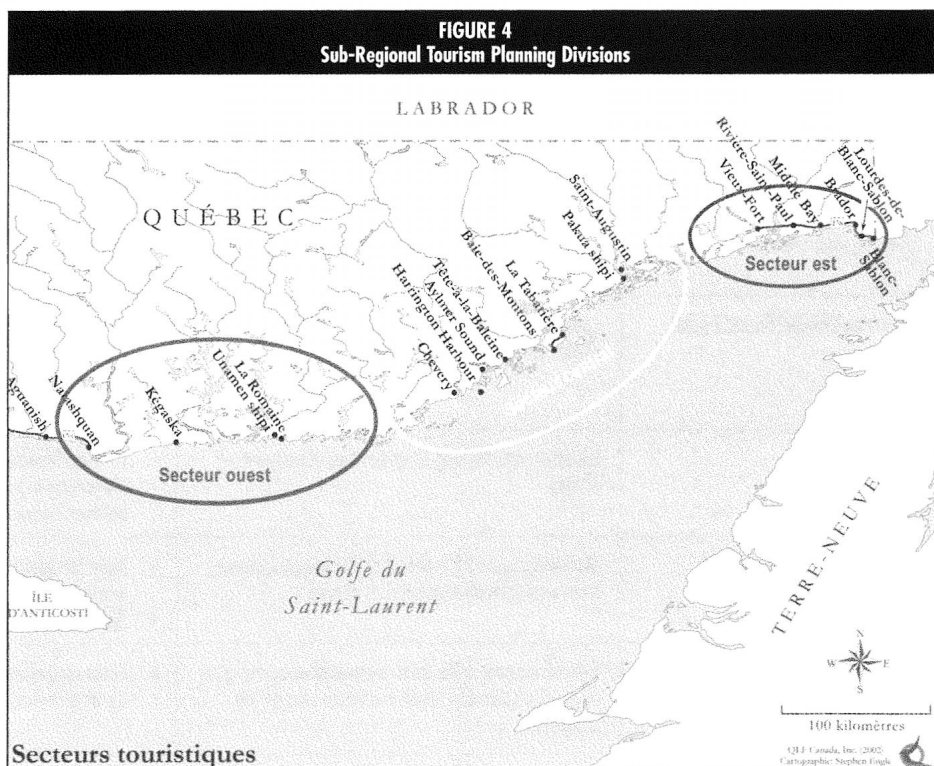
that involves a clear vision as well as a carefully managed, co-ordinated program for product development, marketing, education and training, and improved access to the region. Foremost in the vision is a commitment to sustainable practices, so as to protect the heritage and way of life and to ensure that tourism is complementary with other economic activities in the region (QLF 2002).

Nature-Based

Blamey (2001) argues that in order for ecotourism to be sustainable it must be nature-based, environmentally and culturally educative, and sustainably managed. Nature-based tourism is primarily con-

cerned with “direct enjoyment of some relatively undisturbed phenomenon of nature” (Valentine, 1992 : 108). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (1991) adds that, in a context of ecotourism, it must be travel to natural areas that is responsible and conserves the environment.

The LNS tourism plan identifies the creation of new destination trips, which are based on the strengths of the region's natural and cultural assets that will support ecotourism development. Sea kayaking, birding, archaeology and history, and eco-adventure are identified as a number of new target markets. The thousands of small islands and bays along the coast provide well-protected and accessible waters for kayakers. The six federally protected seabird sanctuaries, established in 1925 by the Canadian Wildlife Service, support thousands of seabirds. A visitor's code of conduct limits visitation to small groups at certain times of the year. Boardwalks and signage at St. Marys Islands and Bradore Bay sanctuaries are aimed at minimizing physical impacts, educating visitors about the diversity of marine birdlife, and offering wildlife view-



ing opportunities (Hull, 1998). The rich archaeological heritage, representing 9,000 years of human presence in the region, also provides a unique opportunity to understand the five cultures that have inhabited the region. Finally, the announcement in July 2002 by the Quebec Government, designating four new territorial reserves on the LNS, has increased the area under the IUCN's protected area classification system (IUCN, 1994) in the region from 2% to 78% (MEF, 2002). The establishment of the reserves will help protect the biodiversity of the region and will at the same time provide attractions for tourists.

Protected areas have been identified by policymakers as playing a key role in rural development strategies in remote areas such as the LNS (Brandon, 1996).

The development of those new destination trips will be attractive to the ecotourism market that is increasingly interested in adventuresome and personalized experiences in remote locales (Wight, 1996).

Environmentally and Culturally Educative

Blamey (2001 : 9) argues that, in implementing ecotourism strategies, there is the

need to provide educational and interpretive programs about the natural environment and any associated "cultural manifestations" through activities that promote the use of original objects, first-hand experiences, and illustrative media.

As part of the LNS plan, the main focus of product development is to enhance a few significant existing attractions and package tours and then cluster additional activities and attractions that have the most potential around them. That strategy is aimed at providing the greatest economic impact for local development (QLF, 2002).

TABLE 2
Evaluation of Sustainable Tourism Principles in the Context of the Lower North Shore Plan

Sustainable Tourism Principles (Tourism Concern, 1991)	Lower North Shore Tourism Plan	Main Challenges
Using resources sustainably	Mentioned as key component of vision statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Putting theory into practice
Reducing over consumption/waste	Water, waste, energy addressed and evaluated as part of plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Region has limitations Water conservation measures needed Solid waste management programs in place in selected communities only Inadequate sewage disposal to handle large numbers of visitors Ample energy supply for industry
Maintaining biodiversity	Protected areas newly established in region by Provincial Government Codes of Conduct developed for marine sanctuaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negotiations between Provincial Government and local residents about access and management issues for new reserves Many residents utilize resources (forestry, fishing, hunting) Fragile sub-arctic environment is subject to negative physical impact with development of tourism
Integrating tourism into planning	Part of overall development strategy for region proposed by Minister of Regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Securing adequate support and funding to implement plan from tourism leaders and government agencies will be critical in measuring success
Supporting local economies	Funding available for tourism entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic selection of businesses to receive funding will be important to provide diversified strategy for development in region
Involving local communities	Clusters of activities in communities proposed as part of plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community associations and residents will need to be involved to implement product development plan and to help coordinate initiatives
Consulting stakeholders and public	Communities and reserves consulted as part of plan as well as outside operators and key actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeping stakeholders informed and involved in implementation phase will be important as plan proceeds Traditional and new communication channels will need to be used—radio, newspapers, general information meetings and Internet
Training staff	Education and training programs key component of plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering flexible programs in region that utilize innovative, hands-on methods of learning in proximity to where participants live, due to large distances between communities
Marketing tourism responsibly	Marketing approach is aimed at obtaining assistance from outside marketing services agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need for outside marketing agency to work closely with CLD, in developing marketing partnerships with operators Need to convey sustainable principles as part of marketing strategy
Undertaking research	Extensive research has been completed as part of plan to provide necessary baseline data for monitoring progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuing efforts will be needed by CLD to evaluate and monitor progress of development as plan is implemented

The Blanc-Sablon visitor's centre and interpretation circuit is one project identified as a proposed anchor attraction for the LNS. The centre will have a dual purpose as a gateway orientation centre by offering visitors available information on tourism products and services of the region. The centre will include exhibitions of artefacts and architectural elements prepared by the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications and will include interactive media, videos, and a website that interprets the landscape, the rich cultural heritage, and the diversity of archaeological sites.

In addition, the centre will offer opportunities to participate in interpretive tours of the LNS to discover the natural and cultural heritage of the region. Those tours will lead visitors "back" in time and will be organized as thematic discovery tours, with a local guide or self-guided leaflets, and will offer travel options by foot, car, bus, or boat (QLF, 2002). A local teacher at the school in Blanc-Sablon is interested in offering certified guide training courses for local students so that they can participate in the programming offered at the centre.

The tours offered by car and bus will be integrated into the Jacques-Cartier Trail, an interpretive driving tour of the region that features fifteen natural and cultural heritage sites along Route 138 in the eastern sub-sector of the LNS. The Trail was established in the 1990s and includes an orientation map, interpretive signage at pull-offs, and living history demonstrations by local residents at key sites along the route (Hull, 2001). In the summer of 2002 a local resident demonstrated the craft of boat building at the Bradore Bay Fishing Interpretation Centre, one of the stops on the trail.

The proposed Blanc-Sablon Interpretation Centre illustrates the small scale and personalized interpretive programming that is being developed to highlight the natural and cultural heritage of the region. Those educational characteristics are important considerations in the development of ecotourism at a destination (Blamey, 2001).



Bernache du Canada.
Photo : Fred Klus.

Sustainably managed

Many policymakers argue that ecotourism must be sustainably managed through the implementation of development strategies that balance tourism supply and demand and integrate principles of sustainable tourism (Inskeep, 1991; Wheeler, 1995; Blamey, 2001). The challenge for ecotourism planners is that there are significant gaps between policy endorsement and implementation (Berry and Ladkin, 1997; Garrod and Fyall, 1998). Table 2 provides an evaluation of the LNS tourism plan based on the principles for sustainable tourism outlined by Tourism Concern in 1991. The chart evaluates the degree to which those principles are addressed in the LNS plan and identifies challenges that the CLD will need to address as the plan is implemented in the region.

In reviewing the principles of sustainable tourism, the main challenge identified by the CLD and the provincial government at the initial stage of implementing the ecotourism plan, is to secure adequate support and funding from tourism leaders and government agencies to match available funding sources. A two-day workshop is planned by the CLD for the fall of 2002 to begin negotiations with key funding agencies.

Conclusions

The LNS is a vast wilderness region, with spectacular coastal scenery, abundant marine life, and a rich historic and ethno-

graphic heritage (QLF, 2002). Due to the closure of the cod fishery in the region in the decade of the 1990s, unemployment levels remain high and the region's population base continues to decline. In 2001, the Provincial Government, working with the CLD, issued three directives for sustainable development that include diversifying marine resources, developing a northern berry industry, and the development of ecotourism.

The ecotourism plan completed in July 2002 by the QLF planning team provides an inventory and analysis of the LNS as well as a strategy for development that is nature-based, environmentally and culturally educative, and sustainably managed. The initial success of the plan will depend upon the degree of technical and financial support from public and private agencies to implement the strategy as well as the leadership of the CLD in fostering the long-term vision for sustainable tourism in the region.

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