# CONSERVATION GUARDIAN

## VOLUNTEER MANUAL



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## **BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAND NATURE TRUST**

Island Nature Trust (INT) was incorporated in 1979 to conserve natural ecosystems in PEI. INT acquires land through donation and purchase, protects it under legislation that prevents development, and manages it to sustain healthy, robust natural environments. INT's vision is **a future where P.E.I. has a network of protected, robust natural areas championed by knowledgeable, engaged Islanders.** 

INT now owns or leases over 4,000 acres, including off-shore islands, hardwood, softwood and mixed-wood forests, wetlands and coastal shores. INT also assists private landowners who wish to conserve and protect their own land, monitors and protects species-at-risk on the Island, and delivers numerous nature education programs to children and adults.

INT operates through its own fund-raising initiatives which range from an annual fundraising dinner, to applications for specific project-based funding, to government and non-government sources. INT operates as a not-for-profit organization.

### THE WORK OF INT IS FOUNDED UPON, AND GUIDED BY, THE FOLLOWING CORE VALUES:

**I. Care and responsibility for the land:** We are committed to environmentally and socially responsible management of natural areas in PEI

**II. Integrity and respect:** We are dedicated to integrity and respect in all dealings with staff, members, clients and partners

**III. Excellence:** We are a professional, science-based, strategic-minded organization that is committed to excellence, efficiency and safety in all activities

**IV. Collaboration:** We work in good faith to achieve common goals through discussion and cooperation. Our approach to decision-making is transparent, consultative and fiscally responsible

## **OUR APPROACH TO STEWARDSHIP**

At INT, we strive to be exemplary stewards of the land we own. The stewardship we practice includes restoration of lands impacted by past human use (for example, through planting of native trees and shrubs, removal of invasive species and remnants of past habitation) and engagement of community members as champions of these lands.

Appropriate use of natural areas by local communities is encouraged and sometimes includes provision and maintenance of trails, allowances for fishing, hunting and trapping, and traditional gathering of natural materials for non-commercial purposes. We continue to seek mechanisms to engage residents in natural areas management, as we believe that people must personally connect with the land to know and cherish it.

## **The Stewardship Process STEP 1 - LAND ACQUISITION** INT, specifically our Executive Director, works on acquiring land. INT staff complete a baseline documentation report outlining the state of the land and information on its natural features STEP 2 - LEGAL DESIGNATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN Once a property is acquired, it is protected under the PEI Natural Areas Protection Act (NAPA). The NAPA designation process involves the development of a management plan for the property, which includes general guidelines for management, and a list of prohibited activities. STEP 3 - MONITORING Monitoring occurs at least once per year at each natural area to assess the use, changes, conditions, and threats in the natural area. **STEP 4 - RESTORATION** Restoration occurs in natural areas where ecological integrity has been compromised and the land must be returned to a more natural state.

Monitoring is a crucial part of managing and conserving INT's network of natural areas. Reports submitted to INT help to document changes in natural areas over time and inform and prioritize future management activities in INT natural areas.

INT staff and Conservation Guardian volunteers work together to protect INT's natural areas, and each person's involvement and commitment is important.



## THE CONSERVATION GUARDIAN PROGRAM

Island Nature Trust's Conservation Guardian Program was originally initiated in the 1990s, but over time, and without dedicated funding and staff, the program became inactive. In 2016, The Trust received funding to reinvigorate the Conservation Guardian program. Since then, INT has been working to connect with volunteers across the Island who are passionate about nature conservation and are looking for ways to contribute to our work.

After a property has been acquired by INT and protected under NAPA, regular monitoring must be done to ensure that the natural features for which the property was protected remain intact and to mitigate any risks to these features. Restrictions on land use (e.g. cutting wood, garbage dumping, use of all-terrain vehicles), special land requirements (e.g. protection of a specific plant or animal), preventing vandalism, and checking trail and signage conditions are the most common reasons why moni-



toring is done. INT receives consistent information on a natural area's condition from the people who are most familiar with it - volunteer Conservation Guardians like you! With this information, INT is able to make effective plans of action for management of the natural area. Through INT's stewardship program, volunteer Conservation Guardians have opportunities to develop their skills, meet new people, and assist with and participate in stewardship events.

Stewardship is not only about monitoring, it is also about cherishing the land, connecting others to nature, and enhancing the quality of life for future generations. The Mi'kmaq people have a term, Netukulimk, which means to be physically and spiritually nourished by the land while also working to protect it so it may provide for future generations. With Netukulimk, everything is interconnected and interdependent. Thus, any changes or activities must be carefully considered to understand

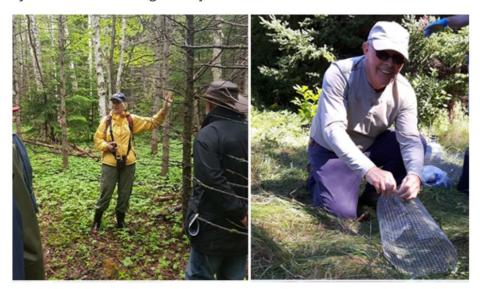


how such changes will impact the surrounding environment. At INT, we have adopted a Netukulimk approach and try to weigh our options carefully when making management decisions to ensure we are not compromising ecosystems or ecosystem functioning for future generations.

Restoration may also be needed in some properties where ecological integrity has been compromised. For instance, some INT natural areas contain plantations. Plantations are essentially tree monocultures, which provide minimal habitat for wildlife. In plantations, we often will work to restore our native Acadian forest by creating small patch cuts where we plant native tree and shrub species. Our restoration efforts are always monitored in subsequent years to measure success. Conservation Guardians may also be involved with monitoring restoration efforts.

## **CONSERVATION GUARDIAN RESPONSIBILITIES**

The main responsibility of a Conservation Guardian is monitoring. This means visiting their chosen or assigned INT Natural Area at least once per year to examine it for changes, and then noting those changes on the INT Conservation Guardian Report Form and/or notifying the Stewardship Coordinator of the changes through written or verbal communication. Essentially, Conservation Guardians are the eyes and ears on the ground for INT.



- Read the Conservation Guardian Manual and make sure you understand the terms of your volunteer position
- Follow stewardship policies and procedures
- Maintain communication with INT's Stewardship Coordinator (members of stewardship groups may have a group leader who is in contact with the Stewardship Coordinator on behalf of the group
- Complete a Conservation Report Form for each visit or relay details of property visits to the Stewardship Coordinator through written or verbal communication
- Represent the mission and mandate of Island Nature Trust through stewardship duties and/or at public events

Depending on skills, availability and/or preference, Guardians may also engage in:

- Carrying out natural area maintenance work identified in the management plan and approved by the Stewardship Coordinator
- Recruiting new INT Conservation Guardian volunteers





#### Time Commitment:

Time commitment will vary from Guardian to Guardian. INT asks that Guardians commit to visiting their natural area(s) at least once per year during the day for monitoring. However, Guardians are encouraged to visit as often as they wish.

#### **Skills Required:**

- Good physical condition
- Good observational skills
- Some knowledge of local wildlife and plant species (training can be provided)
- The ability to read maps is useful, but not required (training can be provided)

## NATURAL AREA MONITORING

Regular monitoring of INT's natural areas is completed to assess the changes, conditions of signage and trails (where applicable), and threats in the natural areas. Monitoring can be done by Conservation Guardians and INT board members and staff. Monitoring reports are reviewed by the Stewardship Coordinator and/or the Executive Director.

**Essential Documents:** Monitoring form template, previous monitoring reports (if applicable), briefing document prepared by INT staff with information on the natural area, maps of natural areas including trails and landmarks.

**CONTACT**: Stewardship Coordinator, email: *land@islandnaturetrust.ca* 

## **MONITORING PROCESS**

1. Receive monitoring form from Stewardship Coordinator

2. Review the appropriate natural area summary, species list, management plan, and previous monitoring reports (if applicable)

3. Plan a trip and timeline (however your initial property visit should be with INT staff):

- Choose a time when natural area features are most visible and accessible (usually spring, summer or early fall)
- Some natural areas require special consideration and may require more than one visit per year and/or at different times of year



4. Prepare for your natural area visit. Review monitoring Field Guide for safety guidelines, and a monitoring checklist

5. Visit the natural area with the monitoring form (which can be printed off, or just take notes if you prefer) and collect information and photos. Please refer to monitoring form example in the Field Guide for more information on the important details to collect

6. Send monitoring forms (include photos and GPS points if available) to the Stewardship Coordinator



## **STEWARDSHIP TRAINING**

Conservation Guardians will have an initial training session with the Stewardship Coordinator to orient the Guardians on the mission and practices of INT, and the process of natural area monitoring. Conservation Guardians will also be provided with a variety of resources, including: species at risk fact sheets and invasive species fact sheets.

Additional workshops and training sessions are often offered to Conservation Guardians for useful skills such as plant identification, bird identification, nature photography, etc. Information on these training events will be distributed by the Stewardship Coordinator via email or telephone. If you have any specific requests for training, please contact the Stewardship Coordinator.

## **USEFUL APPS**

The following applications can be downloaded to smart phones and tablets from your devices



Merlin is an ornithological app from Cornell Lab that provides simple descriptions and instructions when trying to identify a bird. There are two options for identifying birds: answer 5 questions about a bird and Merlin will come up with a list of possible matches; or, snap a photo of a bird, or pull one from the camera roll and Merlin Photo ID will offer a short list of possible matches. The Explore Birds option (on the bottom of the start page) allows users to explore various species and includes ID information as well as sounds and range maps.



iNaturalist allows users to explore and share your observations from the natural world. Users can upload photos of plants, animals, fungi, etc. and the app will auto-identify the species. Other users can also identify sightings. If you are using iNaturalist when monitoring INT properties, please let the Stewardship Coordinator know and they will add you to the Island Nature Trust Natural Areas project.



Avenza allows users to use their own mobile devices to locate yourself without Internet or network connections. Using your device's built-in GPS to stay safe, on track, on the trail and aware of where you are on any map, even in the most remote places. Maps can be sent to Guardians specific to their chosen Natural Area. An Avenza How-To Guide is also available for more information and instruction.

## **AVAILABLE MATERIALS**

Conservation Guardians have access to materials and resources from INT:

- Property maps are available for GPS and Avenza (along with a How To Guide for the Avenza App)
- Waterproof notebooks to record site surveys
- T-Shirts
- INT car sign to put in window while out monitoring
- Conservation Guardian Field Guide

Thank you!

All of us here at Island Nature Trust want to thank you for your interest in becoming a Conservation Guardian! Without your hard work and dedication, we would not be able to accomplish the important things that we do. You help us keep our island wild and healthy!

If you have any questions at all, or would like more information on any of Island Nature Trust's other land stewardship projects, let us know and we will be happy to help!

## **Contact Information**

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