

Nova Scotia lags behind the other three
Atlantic provinces in highway signage policies

Are we there yet?

by Joanie Veitch

A visiting young couple from Europe (he is Dutch, she is English) head out in their rented vehicle from the beautiful Margaree Valley for a tour of the world-famous Cabot Trail. Their impressions upon return are eagerly awaited by their hosts.

But they're singularly unimpressed.

"What's with all the signs? They're everywhere. It's so ugly ... 10 kilometres to a craft shop, five kilometres to the craft shop, two kilometres to the craft shop, 100 metres to the craft shop. We couldn't believe it. Why do you allow that?"

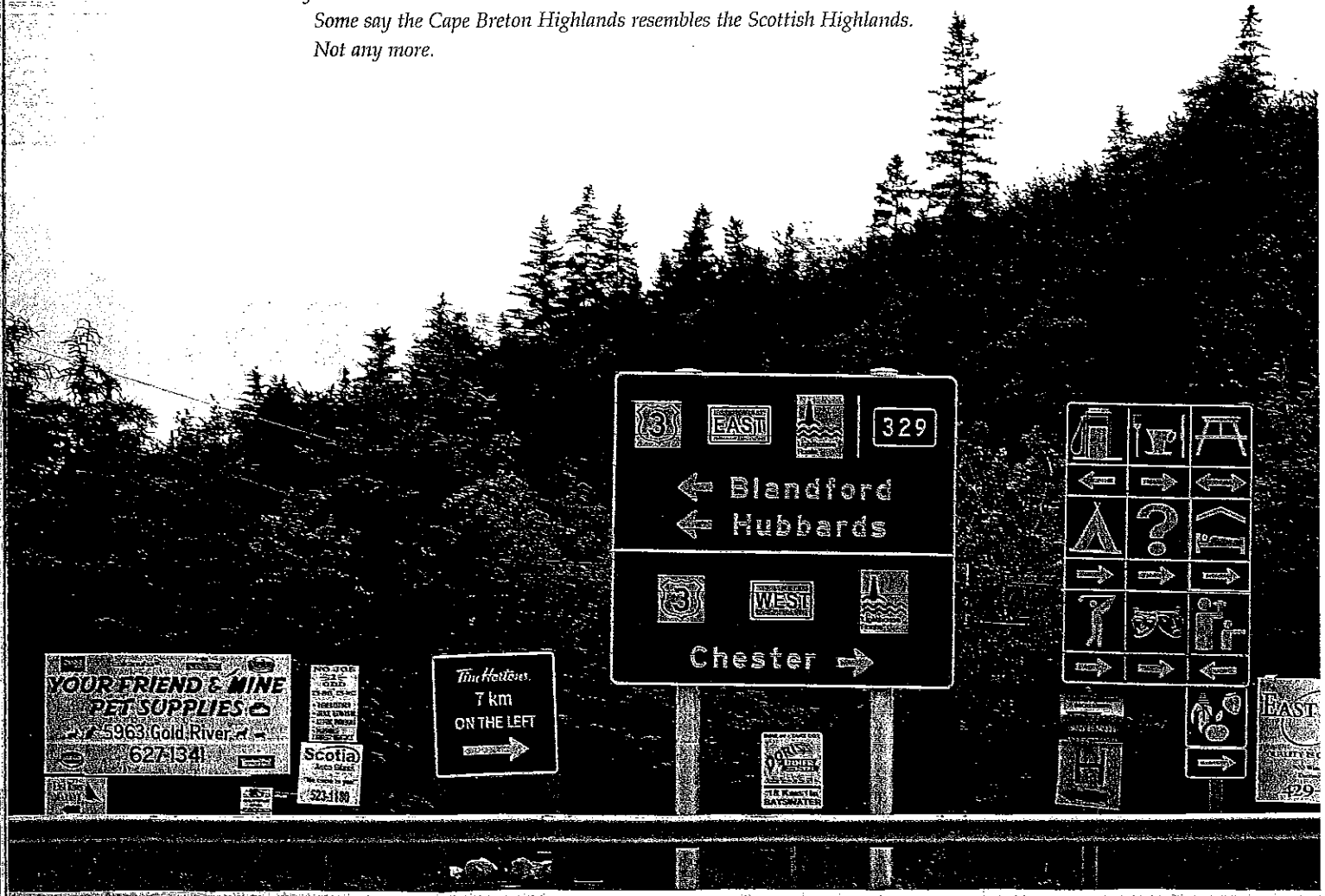
Why indeed.

Now, switch locations.

In one of the most iconic places on the planet, a small, plain green sign says simply "Loch Ness." That's it. No "monster burger" joints, no "monster" theme parks—in fact, nothing. It's not allowed. The scenic integrity of the Scottish Highlands is scrupulously protected by law.

Some say the Cape Breton Highlands resembles the Scottish Highlands.

Not any more.



It's a beautiful day in Nova Scotia. Itching for a change of scenery, urban day trippers head west on Highway 103 to the province's South Shore. Many take exit 10 as the most direct route to Mahone Bay, a pretty seaside town just a 60-minute drive from Halifax.

Off the main highway, cars wait to turn right at the intersection with Highway 3, where a short drive takes them past Mahone Bay's three churches at the head of the harbour and onto the main drag, colourful with its cafes and boutiques.

Paralleling part of the 103 by meandering along the coast, Highway 3 rolls out some of the province's most iconic views. It also offers up something else.

Signs of all shapes and sizes are peppered along this coastal roadway, some staggered, others in clumps—often on both sides of the road. The stretch coming into Mahone Bay is bad. And for those who carry on another 14 kilometres down the road to Lunenburg—a UNESCO world heritage site—it's just the same. Maybe even worse.

Ron and Mary Macnab, a retired couple from Dartmouth, NS, who love to drive their 1986 Volkswagen van off the main highways and onto back roads as often as they can, view Highway 3 as one of the worst in the province for signage.

"As soon as you get onto the old highway, it's an awful array of signs," Mary says. "It's an absolute abomination."

"I can't imagine they actually work in terms of marketing; you are saturated with them, and many are about events that have already passed," Ron adds.

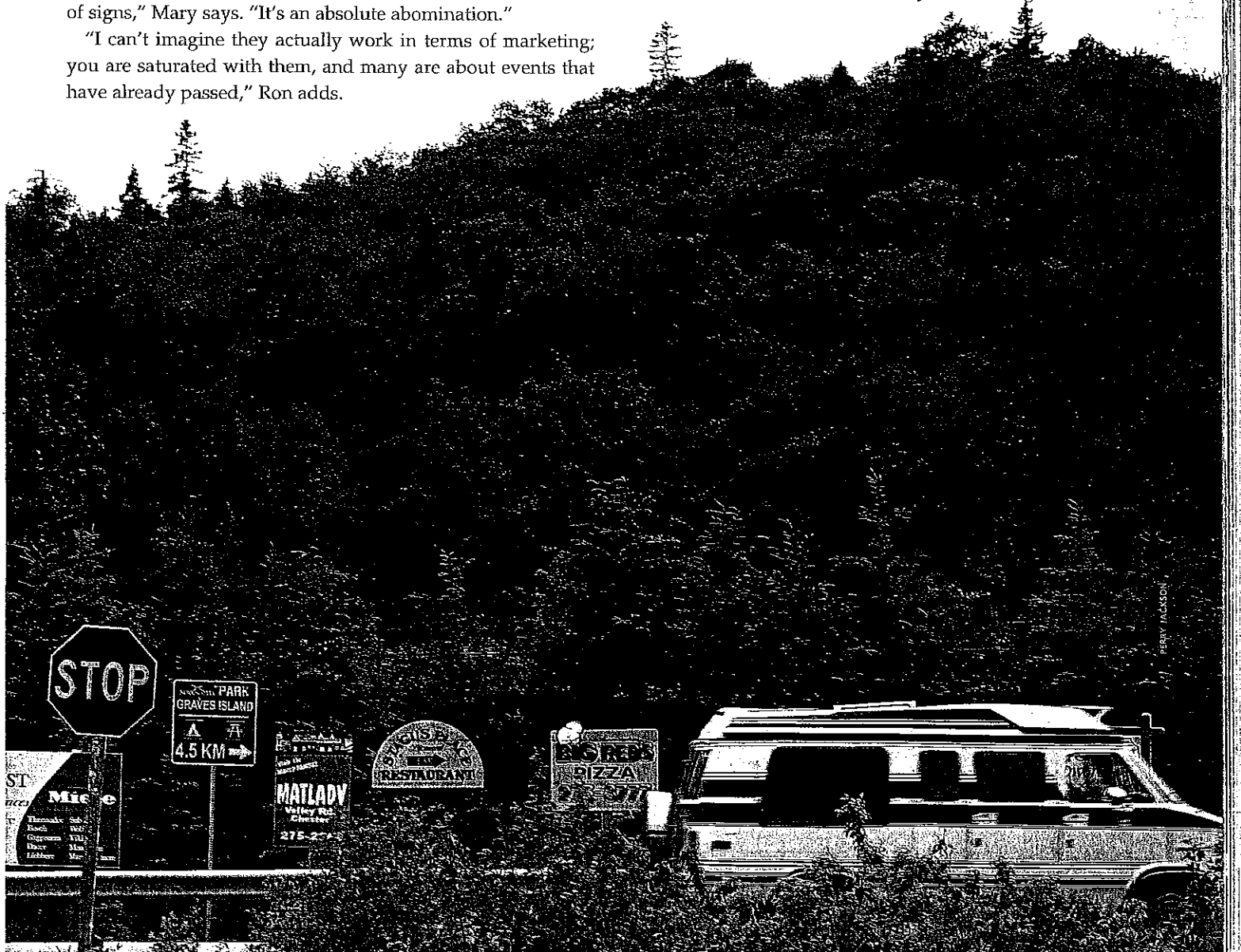
As a secondary road, Highway 3 isn't subject to the same signage regulations as the province's 100-series highways. As long as signs don't block drivers' sightlines or contravene municipal bylaws, businesses are free to post signs as they see fit, says Brian Storrie, highway signage officer with Nova Scotia Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, where he has worked for 40 years.

"It's wide open. It's a situation that has led to some advertising clutter, for sure."

Nova Scotia has 14,020 kilometres of paved highways. Although signs can be a welcome sight for weary travellers looking for respite, too much signage can create what some call "visual pollution." It's a safety concern as well, Storrie says. "A sign that is not planned right can cause everything from a fender bender to a serious injury or fatality. Too many of them can definitely cause a safety hazard."

Until July 15, 2001, when the government introduced amendments to the Public Highways Act, the rules governing highway advertising signage dated back to the 1960s, and business signs had proliferated to the point that Nova Scotia's roadways were regarded as a free-for-all.

In 1998, following complaints from organizations, tourism operators and individuals—many contending the situation



FERRY JACKSON



Mary and Ron Macnab, of Dartmouth, NS, love to drive on Nova Scotia's back roads. They see Highway 3, shown on pages 34-35, as one of the worst in the province in terms of visual pollution. "It doesn't set visitors up for a good experience," Ron says.

was hurting the province's reputation as a scenic touring destination—the government said it would provide leadership on the issue and develop a new policy. "We have an obligation to provide directional signage for the motoring public... We hope to establish some consistency in our overall approach," said Clifford Huskisson, then minister of transportation and public works, in a press release dated July 17, 1998.

Armed with a discussion paper recommending a Tourist-Oriented Directional Signage model (TODS)—a widely used approach that permits only tourism-related businesses to place signs along provincial roadways and in a standardized, consistent format, in effect on Prince Edward Island, in New Brunswick and most recently, Newfoundland and Labrador—the government launched a public consultation process. After two years—and a change from a Liberal government under Russell MacLellan to the Progressive Conservatives, led by John Hamn—a committee representing government, industry associations and private businesses drafted a new policy with broad support, which included the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia (TIANS).

The full scope of that policy never came to fruition. Unwilling or unable to identify how it was scuttled, current TIANS president Darlene Grant Fiander says that the result was not the comprehensive signage policy that many had envisioned. "That committee came up with some very good solutions, dealing with both the business and environmental aspect of what was needed, but it was never fully implemented."

New regulations did come into effect on July 15, 2001. Along with various signage programs for the 100-series highways, the main change for private businesses was that advertising signs on controlled-access highways would now have to be 1,000 metres off centre line. In an effort to appease businesses who already had signs up, about 150 signs that did not meet these new standards were to "transition" to the new regulations over a period of time.

That approach has led to confusion and inequity for businesses, contends Darlene Grant Fiander, who says TIANS' understanding was that those signs would remain for a grace period of between one and five years. As it's turned out, she says, not only have some of the original signs not come down,

a few new ones have gone up without repercussion.

"It's an uneven playing field," she says.

In a letter written last fall to Bill Estabrooks, minister of transportation and infrastructure renewal, Grant Fiander and Danny Morton, TIANS chair, asked for a review of the signage issue, stating: "The recommendations around the billboards, from the last provincial study, have not been implemented and this has resulted in a very haphazard and unfocused approach to commercial advertising. From a tourism perspective, there are issues around guidelines and access to a marketing medium, as well as concerns with the environmental aspect regarding the image of the province."

John Pothier, owner of Pothier Motors, an auto dealership in Falmouth, NS, is one of the business operators allowed to keep his signs on Highway 101 after the new regulations came into effect in 2001. When his two signs—each costing him about \$10,000—were damaged in a windstorm last fall, he received a notice from transportation and renewal to remove them. To put new signs up, Pothier says, he was told he'd have to follow the new regulations and have them 1,000 metres from the centre line. "You'd need a pair of binoculars to see them if I put them that far back. They'd be in the Avon River so I guess I'd have to float them."

After hearing of Pothier's situation, Chuck Porter, MLA for Hants West, introduced a private member's bill this past April, calling for an amendment to the regulations so that people like Pothier can modify or replace their signs. Under the current legislation the face of signs that were "grandfathered" can be maintained or replaced, but the basic structure has to remain intact for the sign to be allowed to stay.

"This just doesn't make any sense. If we are to support businesses then we have to allow them to advertise. If it's the opinion of the business owner that a sign on the highway is beneficial, then I want to support that—that's what this amendment is about.

"Putting it 1,000 metres off the road now...well if I've got to strain to see that lovely sign there might be a safety issue then. Our biggest problem here is that there's no consistency on signs.

"They want to talk about signs as a safety issue, but as someone who worked for many years as a paramedic, I can't recall a sign ever being such a distraction that it's caused an accident," says Porter.

What's a business to do? Pacrim Hospitality, Atlantic Canada's largest hotel operator, has developed properties across Nova Scotia, many of which are fewer than 10 years old. "We plan to develop further hospitality-related businesses," says Pacrim CEO Glenn Squires.

"While businesses that have been open longer than 10 years may have billboards that have, in some cases, been grandfathered, Pacrim is unable to utilize this form of advertising in many areas. We believe there should be a uniform system of highway signage that creates an even playing field—a pro-



PERRY JACOBSON

Cape Breton business owner Ivan MacLeod: sign maintenance is a pet peeve.

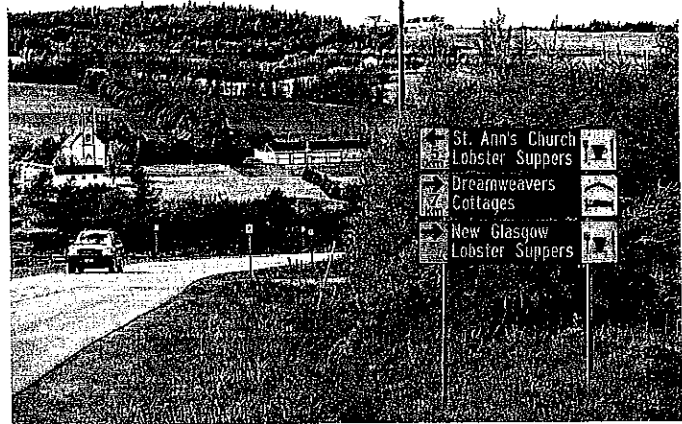
vincially mandated, regulated and uniform system that is fair to everyone and aesthetically appropriate would be the most effective way to resolve the current unsightly and unbalanced highway billboard policy, or lack thereof."

According to researcher Alison Smiley, president of the Toronto-based Human Factors North Inc. and the consultant hired by New Brunswick when that province opted for a Tourist-Oriented Directional Signage program in 2001, when driving down the highway at more than 90 kilometres an hour, you have just six to 10 seconds to locate and read a sign; it takes about one second to read each word or symbol on it. Whether it's a directional guide, tourism attraction or private business advertisement, less is more, and consistency is critical—it's much easier to spot consistent signage, Smiley says. "It has got to be simple. It is easy to overload people when they're moving down the highway at 30 metres per second."

Less is more—that's the approach PEI took nearly 40 years ago when it got rid of billboards and other business advertising on roadways. "Our viewscapes are very important to us. The signs just clutter up the view," says Thom MacMillan, president of the Tourism Industry Association of PEI, and owner-operator of several tourism businesses in the Cavendish area. "I'm sure businesses fought it tooth and nail when it was implemented, but now it's just the way we do things. We get a lot of comments from visitors about how nice it is to not have advertising signs all over the roads."

After extensive consultations in 2008, the Newfoundland and Labrador government announced its plan to eradicate billboards in favour of a standardized Tourist-Oriented Directional Signage model as well, allocating more than \$400,000 in last year's budget to remove illegal signs under existing regulations in preparation for rolling out a new signage policy.

Regardless of the system, enforcement and maintenance are key. Maintenance of signs is one of Ivan MacLeod's pet peeves.



JOHN SYLVESTER PHOTOGRAPHY

PEI has adopted the TODS model: consistent signs, for tourism operators only. "Our viewscapes are important to us," says one PEI business owner.

Signs of the times?

The Tourism Oriented Directional Signage (TODS) model, the primary highway signage system used throughout Canada, the US and many international jurisdictions, permits tourism-related operators—businesses with tourist attractions or services for motoring tourists—to have signage along provincial roadways and in a standardized, consistent format. PEI has had a TODS system since the early 70s; New Brunswick since 2001; Newfoundland and Labrador initiated the move to a TODS system in 2008.

A key component is that signs are restricted to tourism operators, rather than open to all businesses—the signs are said to be directional (providing direction and distance) rather than promotional.

Advocates of the TODS system say provincial highways are not intended to be a promotional or advertising corridor for businesses; that providing clear signage to regional attractions, historic sites and other tourism-related businesses is good for all businesses in a region; and that too many signs serve only to distract motorists and make all signage less effective.

As a cottage and campground owner-operator near Inverness, Cape Breton, MacLeod relies on two hand-painted signs on either side of town to direct people to his site. Every fall, he takes them down and every spring he freshens them up before putting them up again.

"It bugs me that so many people have seasonal businesses but keep their signs up year round. They end up looking awful. The upkeep is a big part of signage."

MacLeod remembers attending the province's consultations on highway signage back in the early 2000s. It was a contentious issue then, and despite advances in GPS technology, making signs less necessary than they once were, signage remains a thorny topic, he says. As both a tourism operator and someone who loves to set off on a road trip with his wife and two young sons in the off-season, he sees both sides.

"As long as they are well-maintained, signs are helpful for advertising and directing people to your location. But if I were to step back and look at the whole scheme of things, I do think there are too many of them," he says. "It's definitely a problem we need to deal with and from what I've seen, Nova Scotia doesn't have an answer yet." 🐼