

# Recognize Malpeque

BY J.A. (SANDY) BURNETT

A couple of weeks ago I spent a memorable Sunday afternoon at Prince Edward Island's Cabot Provincial Park. It was not one of those pristine days calculated to convince Island visitors that they have stumbled accidentally into the Garden of Eden. The weather was miserable. Gale force northeasterly winds off the Guld of St. Lawrence shredded a thick blanket of fog into horizontal gusts of cold rain that beat against the windows of the park's Interpretation Centre.

Inside the building some forty people had gathered to witness the Hon. Tom McMillan, Canada's Minister of the Environment, as he formally dedicated Malpeque Bay as a "wetland of international importance" under the Ramsar Convention.

"Wetland indeed!" came the unbidden thought. "If it gets any wetter there'll be no land left to dedicate."

still, the sarcasm was only momentary, and out of place at that. Wetlands - marshes, bogs, coastal shallows and river estuaries - are among the world's most precious resources. They are natural reservoirs for vital water supplies; they harbour immense quantities of wildlife; they provide spawning and rearing grounds for roughly two-thirds of the world's fish; their ecological processes are essential to the healthy functioning of this planet.

One might suppose that such critically important areas would be treasured; yet, mankind has subjected these delicately balanced ecosystems to such abuse that more than half of the world's wetlands have now been destroyed - mostly in this century.

Regrettably, Canada's record in this regard has not been very admirable, at least until recently. To date, as much as 80% of the Fraser delta in British Columbia, 71% of Prairie sloughs and potholes, 70% of southern Ontario wetlands, and 65% of Maritime coastal marshes have been lost - drained for agriculture, or terminally polluted by municipal and industrial wastes, or filled for urban expansion.

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, which was signed in 1971 at Ramsar, Iran, is a formal, diplomatic acknowledgment that wetlands are at risk everywhere. Australia, Finland, Greece and Norway were among the first nations to commit themselves to making the preservation of wetlands a priority consideration in their national land-use planning. Canada, which adopted the Convention in 1981, has since become a world leader in this field. To date, thirty Canadian sites have been designated as wetlands of international importance under the terms of the Ramsar Convention, with at least one in every province and territory.

