

Chapter 2

The Go Home Bay Biological Station: A Landscape of Science

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IN THIS VOLUME'S FIRST CHAPTER, Stephen Bocking proposes areas for further research into the environmental history of science in Canada. Among them, he suggests that historians pay closer attention to the historical geography of science, including the situated relations of scientists, governments, and Indigenous peoples. Stephen's original blog post on this subject prompted me to re-examine a particular landscape of science—Canada's first freshwater research laboratory, the Go Home Bay Biological Station in Ontario.

The station was part of the Madawaska Club, a private summer resort established by University of Toronto faculty in 1898. Club members bought 1,600 acres of rocky land and islands around Go Home Bay, an inlet on Lake Huron's Georgian Bay. Members occupied the rugged and isolated site in May of 1898, camping and eating communally. Over time, members built permanent dwellings, and the club (which still exists) became an enclave of private cottages. Club members lived seasonally at Go Home Bay, enjoying community picnics, sailing regattas, and church services through the summer months.¹

Club members established the biological station in 1901. Two years later they convinced the federal government to fund the laboratory. The second federally supported field station in Canada, the Go Home Bay Biological Station joined a network of American laboratories previously established in Michigan and Ohio. These stations focused attention on Great Lakes fisheries, hoping to better understand their biological



Figure 1. Summer days in Go Home Bay. Photo: J.W. Bald/Library and Archives Canada/PA-029360.

conditions and thus inform state regulation and fish-culture policy. By 1905, the Go Home Bay station consisted of a lab building, a boathouse, and living quarters for researchers, who often arrived in May and did not leave until September.

That the biological station was embedded in a summer resort was not unusual. Philip J. Pauly and Helen M. Rozwadowski have described “resort science” in the United States and how it fostered professional scientific communities, helping to define biology as a discipline. As Rozwadowski argues, recreation, like work, was a mode of knowing nature. Whether during expeditions or encamped at stations, scientists and students enjoyed vacations while also pursuing their outdoor studies, blurring the line between recreation and research.²

What Pauly and Rozwadowski leave unexplored, however, is the historical geography of these resorts. For the Madawaska Club and its

biological station, the critical context is Georgian Bay's complex history of treaties and land surrenders, the legal terrain that transformed Georgian Bay into a summering place for settlers in the late nineteenth century. This history, detailed by Peggy Blair in *Lament for A First Nation*, frames the pursuit of science at the station in turn.³

As Blair shows, treaty-making in the region confined the region's Ojibway bands, including Chippewa of Lake Simcoe and southern Georgian Bay, to an increasingly smaller land base as conflict with settlers over resources increased. Treaties, however, only vaguely defined critical areas, particularly southern Georgian Bay. To settlers, the 1850 Robinson-Huron Treaty ceded territory from Penetanguishene in southern Georgian Bay to Sault Ste. Marie in the north.

But First Nations did not accept this interpretation. They argued the treaty never covered the Bay's extensive archipelago of islands, channels, and bays. Moreover, Chippewa occupied key islands in Georgian Bay, most notably Manitoulin and Christian islands. The latter became a reserve in 1856, providing a home for Chippewa to continue traditional food provisioning in places such as Go Home Bay.

Through the last half of the nineteenth century, settlers intensified their exploitation of Georgian Bay's minerals, fish, and timber. Facilitated by an expanding transportation network, settlers soon pursued another form of exploitation—tourism. Itinerant tourists were the first to visit, followed by those who sought permanent cottage sites for seasonal occupation. In the late 1890s, there was a land rush of sorts as people from southern Ontario and the northeastern United States bought up islands and shorelines in Georgian Bay.⁴

By the time Madawaska Club members bought Go Home Bay at a “nominal price”—a favorable transaction facilitated by Crown Lands Commissioner J.M. Gibson, a University of Toronto alumnus—the site was an exploited and contested one. Frank Fenton, a former commercial fisher



Figure 2. Summer days in Go Home Bay. Photo: J.W. Bald/Library and Archives Canada/PA-029360.

and the club's caretaker, recalled that commercial fishing operations "had pretty well skinned the pickerel [walleye] out before the Madawaska Club moved in."⁵ The surrounding region had also been logged, though it is not clear if Go Home Bay itself had been cleared.

Despite this sale, Chippewa on Christian Island maintained their land claim and exercised their traditional harvesting rights. Club histories show that Chippewa from the Christian Island band regularly visited Go Home Bay to camp and pick blueberries. The club claimed to tolerate these annual visits, framing them as quaint reminders of a romantic past rather than active resistance to a territorial occupation. "The Indians," the first club history recounts, "...were in general very welcome with their baskets and mats as a picturesque and vivid reminder of a vanished era."⁶

The picturesque Indian became an inconvenient one after club members grew intolerant of these annual visits and the band asserted its members' rights. The Christian Island band told the club that band members "could not be prevented from camping on their accustomed ground." The Madawaska Club then asked the federal Department of Indian Affairs to intervene. In 1915, Deputy Minister Duncan Campbell Scott complied and wrote the Christian Island band, demanding that its members stop visiting Go Home Bay.⁷

Throughout this period, the Madawaska Club continued to expand its enclave. While the club had originally bought the land from the Ontario government in 1898, it later bought land directly from Indian Affairs. Club secretary W.J. Loudon kept close tabs on island sales. In 1906, he was able to buy 76 of them—some of them mere rocks that disappeared when water levels were high—extending the club's privatization of contested territory.⁸

Another important historical-geographical context for the Go Home Bay Biological Station is Georgian Bay's fisheries. The Bay's fish—particularly its lake trout, whitefish, and walleye—supported Indigenous subsistence and, after settlers began encroaching on them, commercial and recreational fisheries that expanded through the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1857, the Fisheries Act legitimized dispossession by allowing settlers to fish, and lease, treaty-protected waters. The Fisheries Act also initiated efforts to privilege sport fisheries with measures such as closed seasons, gear restrictions, and catch limits.⁹

These efforts, which marginalized and criminalized Indigenous fisheries, frame the science undertaken at Go Home Bay. Loudon, the club secretary and charter member who helped secure the station's government funding, wanted the biological station to focus on one fish, the smallmouth bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*). Classified as a game fish—and one increasingly reserved for sports fishers—bass were a locus for conflict in Georgian Bay, which was by the late 1800s a famed location for bass

angling. Anglers in the region blamed unrestrained commercial and Indigenous fisheries for declining catches, and demanded that regulations that protected bass be more stringently enforced.¹⁰

It is noteworthy, then, that the station's first project, according to Loudon, was an experiment in bass fish-culture that involved raising fish in a pond on one cottager's property. It is unclear how long the station pursued this work, but it provided material for Loudon's 1910 book *The small-mouthed bass*. There, he noted these experiments along with vivid descriptions of his angling experiences; he also articulated demands for more concerted regulation of bass in Georgian Bay. In Loudon's estimation, the station's scientific mission blended seamlessly with the club's recreational preoccupations, and served to further the latter. Loudon claimed that conserving bass as a "profitable resource" would also help preserve Go Home's utility as a "breathing spot... during the hot summer months."¹¹

Bass are less obviously an object of study in the collection of papers detailing the station's research, published in 1915 after the station closed. Papers included catalogues of fish, insects and other invertebrates. B.A. Bensley's list of Georgian Bay fish referred, however, to a fish-tagging experiment with bass. Now a common approach to investigating fish-population dynamics, mark-and-recapture studies were then innovative and required angler participation to complete. W.A. Clemens, who studied insect life at the station, may have been involved, or at least took note. He later suggested fish-tagging be used to track migrating sockeye salmon in the Fraser River.¹²

Clemens' sojourn at the station illustrates Go Home Bay's role as an incubator of Canadian fisheries science expertise, and sustains Pauly's and



Figure 3. Go Home Bay, Georgian Bay, Ontario. Photo: Frank W. Micklethwaite/Library and Archives Canada/PA-068493.

Rozwadowski's views of the relationship between resort science and the professionalization of biology. Clemens went on to become director of the Pacific Biological Station in Nanaimo, British Columbia, while B.A. Bensley, the station's director for most of its existence, went on to found and direct the Ontario Fisheries Research Laboratory at the University of Toronto. Established in 1921, this laboratory initiated the first provincially directed program of freshwater fisheries science in Canada, as Stephen Bocking has shown elsewhere.¹³

As a site of resort science, the Go Home Bay Biological Station shows how historical-geographical perspectives can deepen our understanding of such places. My interest in Go Home Bay had indeed lain dormant until Stephen's post renewed my interest and encouraged me to look again at this site. Thinking about landscapes of science helps to ground accounts of scientific activity in specific locales, and among specific communities with competing interests and histories. It reminds us that science takes place to happen.

My thanks to Anne Riitta Janhunen for discussion of nineteenth-century land surrenders in Georgian Bay.

¹ The club's history is outlined in two privately printed books: *The Madawaska Club: Go-Home Bay 1898-1923* (Midland, ON: The Midland Press, 1923) and *The Madawaska Club: Go-Home Bay 1898-1948* (Midland, ON: The Midland Press, 1948). Members originally planned to purchase property where the Madawaska River flowed into Rock Lake, which today lies within Algonquin Park. Opposed by logging companies, they turned to Georgian Bay. The club's name thus retains a trace of their initial plan. See *Madawaska Club* (1929): 34.

² Philip J. Pauly, "Summer Resort and Scientific Discipline: Woods Hole and the Structure of American Biology, 1882–1925," in *The American Development of Biology*, ed. Ronald Rainger, Keith Benson, and Jane Maienschein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 121–50,

<https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512805789-007>; Helen M. Rozwadowski, "Playing By—and On and Under—the Sea: The Importance of Play for Knowing the Ocean," in *Knowing Global Environments: New Historical Perspectives on the Field Sciences*, ed. Jeremy Vetter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 162–89.

³ Peggy Blair, *Lament for a First Nation: The Williams Treaties of Southern Ontario* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

⁴ Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005). For histories of American fishing clubs in the region, see Bob Reigeluth, "Iron City Fishing Club History" and Timothy O. Flora, "Pennsylvania Club History since 1896," <http://pennsylvaniaclub.com/history/index.html>.

⁵ *Madawaska Club* (1948): 44.

⁶ *Madawaska Club* (1923): 27. Club members attested to the site's productivity: one recalled picking "more than 20 quarts which we shipped in packing cases to our friends at home." *Madawaska Club* (1948): 18.

⁷ J.D. McLean to W.J. Loudon, January 15, 1906, Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, vol. 2860, file 176,296-49.

⁸ *Madawaska Club* (1923): 28.

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- ⁹ Margaret Beattie Bogue, *Fishing the Great Lakes: An Environmental History, 1783–1933* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 179.
- ¹⁰ William Knight, “Our Sentimental Fisheries’: Angling and State Fisheries Administration in 19th Century Ontario” (MA thesis, Trent University, 2006), 92–97.
- ¹¹ W.J. Loudon, *The small-mouthed bass* (Toronto: Hunter & Rose, 1910), 88.
- ¹² B.A. Bensley, “The Fishes of Georgian Bay,” in *Contributions to Canadian Biology Being Studies from the Biological Stations of Canada 1911–1914. Fasciculus II—Fresh Water Fish and Lake Biology* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1915), 44.
- ¹³ Matthew Evenden, *Fish vs. Power: An Environmental History of the Fraser River* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50; Stephen Bocking, “Ecology and the Ontario Fisheries,” in *Ecologists and Environmental Politics: A History of Contemporary Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 151–78.