Aug 20, 2019 Trip report, Tour of Pelee Island August 17, 2019, Focus:

Pelee Island Pheasant Hunt

Through invitation by Pelee Island Council, OFAH Zone J coordinated with Deputy Mayor Dave Dawson to visit the Island Saturday August 17th, 2019

Zone J Directors and spouses left Kingsville Port at 10 a.m. as “walk on” riders on the Pelee Island 2 Ferry. Deputy Mayor Dawson and 7th generation islander Ford Crawford met us prepared for a days long tour.

Our first stop was for a complimentary lunch at the “The Bakery” which was just outstanding and where we went over the days agenda and received a “coles notes” history lesson. At this time we were presented a much more inclusive package for reading and review.

Leaving there road travel was a constant orientation to the island: hunting areas, local residence and significant building sites, schools, churches, etc. and it was explained where people would hunt, shoot and stay.

Our next “official” stop was at the Scudder Marina where we received additional information by the marina operator who just happens to be the daughter of OFAH Provincial Director at Large (PDAL), Jack Osadzuk. Although a very well managed and busy marina Cindy took whatever time was necessary to inform and answer any questions we had.

Our tour continued to some areas where historical flooding caused agricultural fields and equipment to be covered in water and today it remains an inland wetland and pond. Many of the structures lost, saved, or rebuilt are now elevated on steel beam stilt like structures. We also stopped at a hunters hosting property where the shop is filled with numerous mounts and heritage items from decades past. The shop was very welcoming and certainly reinforces the long standing traditions of the island, islanders and the importance of the hunt to the islands economy.

We visited the Pelee Island Pheasant farm where this year approx 13,000 pheasants are being raised for release during the hunt. Presently they purchase 6 week old poults to maximize efficiency of the operation. The Municipality coordinates and manages all aspects of Pheasant rearing, release, license sales and other administrative roles.

Our next stop was the site of the monument erected in remembrance of Flight 126 that crashed January 17, 2004 shortly after takeoff from Pelee. Twelve lives were lost, 10 people, the pilot his girlfriend and 8 hunters who were professionals and high profile individuals in their communities, and their 2 hunting dogs. Not only was I touched by the monument and the discussion we had at the site but I still feel the emotion at the time of writing this trip report. Ford Crawford our co host and tour guide was the host of these fine individuals and had just dropped them off at the airport after several days of fellowship in and off the field. It was obvious this site still stirs the pain of loss and that tragic day in 2004.

We continued our tour visiting many areas where traditionally hunting had occurred or still occurs. Change in ownership and habitat growth, lack of trail and field maintenance and changes in land use or development have all been significant influences on the hunting on Pelee. Nature Conservancy of Canada owns about 10% of the island. Essex Regional Conservation Authority (ERCA) owns land and there are other “naturalist” and bird watcher groups with ownership and control over several properties.

We proceeded to a community event (a fundraiser – Chili cook off) where it was planned that we would be tasters and meet islanders and have discussions with specific individuals who were both for and against the Pheasant hunt and it’s continuation. Unfortunately, (or fortunately?) the location was the Pelee Island Winery where we were complimentary guests.

Many discussions took place throughout the day which I will summarize in another document. For the purpose of this report I will say there is a strong interest to retain the hunts on the island, there is also a strong interest by some to see the hunt ended. Deputy Mayor Dawson made special note and “Thank You” for the OOD article by Steve Galea in the August issue including quotes from PDAL Jack Osadzuk.

We departed on the 8 p.m ferry continuing our discussion with the Deputy Mayor who also returned to the mainland with us, landing back in Kingsville at approx 9:30 p.m.

Through discussion, a change in hunter behavior, habitat improvement, and potential changes in the administration as well as a return to a positive revenue line item on the Municipal budget the hunt would be best positioned to continue. It is my sense that without some necessary changes the future of the Pelee hunt is bleak.

It would be a sad day to see the end of the Pelee hunt on our watch. Together with dialogue, land management, and enhancements, the cooperation and open minds of all stakeholders, I believe good things can happen.

Yours in Conservation,

Tony Jackson

OFAH

PDAL

Addendum:

Throughout the touring and especially after Ford Crawford’s farm visit it was very clear that the gross reduction in hunt able fields during the last 2-3 decades has caused a significant challenge to find suitable, hunt ing lands and is concerning. Land acquisitions of fields and wood lands by the Nature Conservancy Canada(NCC=10% of Pelee) and others (some using Prov. dollars) has been left to grow into thick tangled vegetation almost impassible. NCC does allow hunting however the lack of trail maintenance and uncontrolled vegetative growth has turned these once prime hunting areas into unusable lands. Wide trails more conducive to pheasant- turkey hunting is needed to be cut and permitted. In recent years the agencies/owners have been too restrictive and done little to manage the habitat. (possibly no dollars to manage or lack of understanding of the need to manage to suit traditional activities) The municipality and others might be willing to do the work necessary but without landowner support this is not possible.

Gentrification and more urban attitudes (e.g. author Margaret Atwood) are affecting the traditional approach but strong support remains from many residents and other stakeholders but clearly some changes are needed.

The hunt is very aggressive, unlike other low density recreational hunting activities these high density, compressed hunt seasons create this competitive, max harvest approach and some careless shooting near school and trespassing or hunting over crops hasn’t helped the island sentiment towards the hunt and hunters. Several times we heard about ignorant hunters, refusing to leave a landowners property as well as discarded shell casings and garbage left by slob participants as reasons for resident discontent.

Better training of MNRF  enforcement and MOECP administrative staff would help the understanding of the islands pheasant hunting rules, land access, and interpersonal issues where restrictions exist . Inexperienced enforcement has not been helpful  in this regard.

Being financially responsible the Municipality has looked at ways to lowering the cost of the hunt. Some have suggested by adding lower cost and alternative bird species might help but wisely the Deputy Mayor noted they are struggling with Pheasant so the addition of another species would only further complicate the situation.

Some raise the options of elitist (hunt costs boosted to “very high” cost) island hunting and limiting opportunities in number of hunts with the thinking that the elitist hunters are more desirable but in fact we heard the opposite in some cases where the privileged seem to have a sense of entitlement and may in fact be the cause of some of the residents hunter fatigue on the island. In addition to this it would eliminate youth and young hunter participation, the future generation of hunters. Oddly enough the Municipal committee responsible for reviewing the hunting situation is lacking hunter representation.

We certainly received an excellent overview . The continuing efforts to keep this heritage hunt going is deserving of our support.

We saw opportunities where we can offer support or suggestions to some of the issues.

(for further discussion)