

# Environmental funding opportunities in Atlantic Canada

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Prepared by:  
Dana Decent



ENVIRONMENT  
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- Stephanie Arnold (Strategy and Innovation Manager and PEI Specialist, CLIMAtlantic)
- Susan Lorraine (Founder, How We Thrive)
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# Introduction

Ten years ago, Environment Funders Canada (EFC) commissioned the report, “[Growing Environmental Philanthropy in Atlantic Canada](#)”, to explore the state of environmental philanthropy in the region, key opportunities for funding, and success stories. The report encouraged more funders to consider Atlantic Canada in their environmental funding strategies.

Since then, Atlantic Canada has significantly changed. The region is experiencing an unprecedented population boom due to inter-provincial migration during the pandemic and an increase in immigration. In 2022, Moncton, Halifax, and Charlottetown were the fastest growing cities in all of Canada. The region’s clean tech sector is growing rapidly and now employs 15,000 people with increasing levels of investment. Indigenous communities are increasingly advancing economic self-sufficiency through [renewable energy projects](#), [seafood industries](#), and [land back efforts](#). And Atlantic Canada is fast becoming a ‘green hydrogen hub’ with the launch of the [Atlantic Hydrogen Alliance](#) and the development of the Everwind project in Unama’ki (Cape Breton), in [collaboration with local Indigenous groups](#). (It’s important to note that some concerns have been raised with respect to the water and land impacts of green hydrogen development.)

*“The region is experiencing an historic moment.  
Conditions are in turnaround mode.”*

*Atlantic Canada Momentum Index, 2023*

Against this backdrop of a population and economic boom, some environmental wins are being missed. Housing stock is being rapidly built that will need to be retrofitted in the years to come to meet net zero goals. There is increasing pressure to develop housing on protected land and wetlands that serve ecological and social functions. Cleantech investment can lack an equity lens at all stages of development. This is an opportune moment for funders to play a key role in building on this momentum while ensuring environmental wins in the region are not being missed. In particular:

- **There is a strong opportunity for deep, systemic impact**  
Communities are tight knit, the region is relatively small (all four provinces together are half the size of Ontario), and there are close connections across the social and environmental impact sectors. This makes relationship-building easier, since there are pre-existing relationships and geographic barriers are limited. Learnings are easily shared and investing in capacity-building can have a far-reaching impact. As a result, the opportunity for systemic impact across the region may be higher than in other provinces, and funding dollars can go further for a positive impact.
- **Atlantic Canada is underfunded compared to the rest of Canada**  
All four provinces have lower charitable activities expenditures per person compared to Ontario and British Columbia, with Newfoundland and Labrador having the second lowest charitable

activities expenditures per person in the whole country. (Nunavut is last.) In addition, although 7% of Canada's population lives in Atlantic Canada, only 2% of foundation gifts of the non-MUSH (Municipalities, Universities, Schools, and Hospitals) sector go to Atlantic Canada. [Investment in the region is long overdue.](#)

- **Atlantic Canada has strong pro-climate attitudes and experiences wide-ranging climate impacts**

There is a very strong understanding in Atlantic Canada that climate change is happening today and is human caused. There is also a strong desire for action. [A 2021 survey of over 1,100 Atlantic Canadians](#) found that 75% agreed Canada should take a leading role in tackling climate change. This may be influenced by the multitude of historic severe weather events and climate impacts that are happening in the region, from hurricanes to sea level rise to floods and wildfires. There is a very high interest in resilience and adaptation efforts.

- **Newfoundland and Labrador can serve as a case study for building a clean economy**

The [oil and gas sector contributes 25% of Newfoundland and Labrador's GDP and 40% of its exports](#). In response, there is a growing interest among funders in supporting just transition efforts. The [Coalition for a Just Recovery NL](#) is re-starting after a dormant phase the past few years, and Memorial University recently secured a [10-year Canada Research Chair in Equitable Energy Governance and Public Policy for Dr. Angela Carter to research just transition pathways](#). At the same time, there are significant public policy shifts happening in Newfoundland and Labrador. [The province is implementing a Basic Income Program for people aged 60-64](#) and consulting further on Basic Income with all political parties. And the province is transitioning to a Community Health Centres model. Learnings on how to effectively advance a just and equitable transition are immediately applicable to several other provinces in Canada, as well as worldwide. Investments in this area in Newfoundland and Labrador can thus have far ranging impacts beyond the province to advance environmental action.

For all these reasons, the time is now to invest in equitable environmental solutions in Atlantic Canada that also achieve positive social and economic impacts.



# Atlantic Canada context

There are specific contexts about Atlantic Canada that are important for any funder to be aware of before investing in the region:

## Indigenous territory

When we refer to Atlantic Canada, we are referring to Indigenous territory of the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, Innu, and Inuit People. The provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador that make up Atlantic Canada are part of the seven districts of Mi'kma'ki, the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. The Wolastoqey Nation is concentrated in New Brunswick, while Newfoundland and Labrador is home to the traditional territory of Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit People. While there have been recent advancements in human rights, land claims, and resource ownership among Indigenous people in Atlantic Canada, there is still a long way to go to advance true reconciliation and address deep-seated racism, as the recent '[Lobster Wars](#)' have shown.

*Implications: It is vital to support Indigenous-led work, and to foster partnerships between Indigenous communities and environmental partners. Colonization has been present in the Atlantic for far longer than in other parts of Canada and shows up differently. It is important to understand the local context and work with local partners.*

## African Nova Scotians

Atlantic Canada also has a long history of African Nova Scotian settlements. Founded in 1783 by Black Loyalists of the American Revolutionary War, Birchtown in Nova Scotia was the largest free Black settlement in North America at the time. Many African Nova Scotians can trace their ancestry centuries back to waves of settlement from Black Loyalists (1780s), Jamaican Maroons (1796-1800), and refugees from the War of 1812. Today in Nova Scotia, African Nova Scotian is a distinct group from African or Black communities who have settled in Nova Scotia since these events. African Nova Scotians have faced discrimination for hundreds of years — the [destruction of the community of Africville](#) in the 1960s is a brutal example of racism at a municipal level — and many African Nova Scotians continue to face anti-Black racism today. At the same time, there are increasing numbers of community-led solutions to advance economic, social, and environmental opportunities in Nova Scotia, including the [Hammonds Plains Community Land Trust](#), [Akoma Holdings](#), and [Hope Blooms](#). The inaugural [African Nova Scotian Prosperity and Well-being Index](#) was launched in May 2024 and provides a useful socio-economic snapshot.

*Implications: When considering funding, it will be important to recognize the unique history and needs of African Nova Scotian communities and those of Black newcomers. The approach to partnerships and environmental action will be different.*

# Land ownership

Unlike most other provinces, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have very high percentages of privately-owned land—[88% in Prince Edward Island](#) for example. Newfoundland and Labrador is the exact opposite, where [88% of its land is publicly-owned](#). This presents unique funding opportunities and challenges.

*Implications: Where there is a high percentage of privately-owned land, any environmental protection must focus on engagement with landowners. Where there is a high percentage of government-owned land, solutions must focus on engagement with government or with citizens to in turn hold government accountable.*

# Psychology of the region

Atlantic Canada has been perceived as a ‘have not’ region for so long that a scarcity mindset is still real in many parts of the region. After experiencing an outflow of talent for decades, it is hard for many to adjust to the new reality that this is a region where people want—and are able—to live, work, and play.

According to [a report by the Public Policy Forum](#), “Momentum is tangible and recent, so much so that the public imagination has not yet caught up with this profound shift.” While changing, this traditional scarcity mindset can limit a desire for collaboration and partnerships among different organizations towards environmental action. This may be particularly pronounced in areas that have experienced poverty.

*Implications: Ensuring funded projects have budgeted the time and energy needed to foster trust and deepen relationships will be key to fostering real collaboration.*

Poverty is still a very real issue in Atlantic Canada, particularly in New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador. [New Brunswick’s child poverty rate is 16.6%, which jumps to 32% in Saint John. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the child poverty rate is 18%, and this is higher in Saint John’s and in Labrador](#). These percentages are significantly higher than the [national child poverty rate of 9.9%](#) (2022 data).

*Implications: When considering equity in Atlantic Canada, it is important to consider socioeconomic status and class privilege. High poverty rates also mean that communications messaging focused on affordability or food security may have stronger success than those focused on climate change directly.*

The whole Atlantic region is also very tightly knit. A common adage is that you are only two to three degrees of separation from anyone. This fosters a strong sense of belonging, and there is a long history of mutual aid among communities.

*Implications: This tightly knit network can accelerate the advancement of environmental action.*

Prince Edward Island has a very pronounced community mentality and in many ways is very environmentally progressive. There is a strong understanding of the need to build a clean economy and a strong awareness of climate impacts on the island, such as sea level rise and erosion. This has led to some communities in Prince Edward Island becoming renewable energy leaders in the region.



[Georgetown is looking to be the province's first Net Zero Community](#), and one of the first in Atlantic Canada. And in Summerside, [solar energy powers 62% of the city's energy needs](#).

*Implications: While Prince Edward Island has the smallest population among the Atlantic provinces, it often punches above its weight. It can be a key region to prototype and test innovation given the focus on self-reliance, the increasing number of communities investing in renewable energy, and the strong Islander mentality that fosters mutual aid and connection.*

## Wide-ranging environmental impacts

Atlantic Canada faces a large array of environmental impacts, many connected directly to climate change. In the last two years, the region has seen:

- Unprecedented [wildfires in Nova Scotia](#) (2023)
- The costliest hurricane in Canada's history, [Hurricane Fiona](#), that led to hundreds of kilometres of coastline being eroded in Prince Edward Island, and homes in the Newfoundland town of Port aux Basques being washed out to sea (where one woman also died) (2022)
- [Severe flooding](#) that led to four deaths in Nova Scotia (2023)
- [Unprecedented warming ocean temperatures](#) with direct economic and social impacts to fisheries

In addition, the region faces sea level rise and the possibility of significant erosion due to the potential of high tides. Nova Scotia could become an island if a major storm hit at high tide.

*"I think [Hurricane] Fiona has brought more people into the conversation. It was sort of the great equalizer. Everyone lost a tree. Everyone knew someone who lost a tree."*

*[Alexis Bulman](#), former artist-in-residence with the Canadian Centre for Climate Change and Adaptation*

Atlantic Canada has also faced the single largest mass layoff in Canada's history due to environmental mismanagement—the cod collapse in the early 1990s. Over 30,000 fishers and plant workers in Newfoundland and Labrador lost their jobs overnight. While there are still many examples of environmental mismanagement and lack of environmental protection across the region, in general, this event helped foster an understanding that careful natural resource management is critical for social and economic benefit.



*Implications: The combination of all these impacts means there is a very strong understanding that climate change is real, that there are serious risks of losing one's home and livelihood due to environmental changes and/or mismanagement. It is more easily understood in this region that ecosystem protection is essential for social and economic progress. This makes for fertile ground for funders to support equitable environmental solutions. As well, due to the mutual aid mentioned previously, there is a strong sense of communities working together that creates a greater likelihood for resilience efforts to be successful.*

## Gathering insights

To identify opportunities for environmental action and funding in Atlantic Canada, the author gathered insights from over 20 individuals across multiple sectors, identified through personal networks and snowball sampling—where individuals identified more potential people to connect with. Snowball sampling was particularly useful given the tight-knit communities in Atlantic Canada, where people working on environmental action know others in the same space, even if they do not work closely together.

### **The sectors represented included:**

- Private sector, including cleantech
- Non-profit sector
- Government
- Philanthropy
- Academia

### **During each interview, the author explored the following questions:**

- What gaps exist in advancing environmental action in Atlantic Canada?
- Where are the greatest opportunities?
- Are silos a challenge? And, if so, what are some ways to break them down?
- What are innovative examples of successful environmental action in the region?
- If a funder asked you where money should go, what would you say?



# Funder opportunities to advance environmental action in Atlantic Canada

The insights gathered for this report coalesced around six key focus areas for funders: connecting the dots; impact investing; Indigenous sovereignty; ocean conservation; building clean economies; and advancing policy and advocacy.

Across all six areas of focus, there are general approaches funders can take to foster trust, strengthen relationships, and advance reconciliation. These are not unique to Atlantic Canada and are listed here:

- **Trust-based philanthropy:** Trust that organizations and communities doing the work know what solutions are needed.
- **Community-led solutions:** Solutions focused on specific populations or geographic areas will be stronger and have a higher impact if led by those communities.
- **Youth-led solutions:** Youth are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the leaders of today. They are also extremely innovative and flexible to test solutions and advocate. According to [The Youth Harbour](#), “youth are known to be the critical demographic that can foster the political will for climate solutions in Canada.”
- **Multi-year funding:** Organizations benefit from large, multi-year grants as opposed to small, one-off grants. This saves them time and energy so they can focus on the work that needs doing rather than spending significant time fundraising and reporting.
- **Unrestricted funding:** Organizations all need capacity and operations support to do their work. Unrestricted funding enables them to focus on environmental outcomes rather than securing project-by-project funding.

Following these general guidelines, funders can consider the six main funding opportunities identified and explored in detail below.

# 1. Connecting the dots

In the 2015 report “[Growing Environmental Philanthropy in Atlantic Canada](#)”, a key recommendation was to “connect the dots.” The report recommended funders “find ways to support the convening and strategic networking of environmental organizations in the region.”

## Supporting convening and strategic networking can:

- Foster innovation
- Strengthen and establish collaborations, and build trust that may increase the possibility for environmental ‘wins’
- Increase efficiency, since duplication and repetition of efforts is reduced, and learnings are shared

The **need to support convening and strategic networking is still a significant opportunity in Atlantic Canada**. This can be divided into two main steps:

- Ecosystem mapping of who is advancing environmental action in the region
- Convening and capacity-building among environmental organizations, and between social and environmental groups

## Getting to know “Who is doing what?”

There is some understanding within Atlantic Canada about who is advancing environmental action in the region, but gaps remain. **Mapping who is doing what to advance environmental action in Atlantic Canada is a funding opportunity that would be very well received across the region and would be a helpful first step towards greater collaboration.**

Most individuals contacted for this report had a strong desire for greater understanding of who is doing what to advance environmental action in Atlantic Canada. Access to more information will empower them to make stronger decisions about where to focus their energy and enable them to identify organizations with similar interests and goals to advance respective areas of work.

Existing mapping exercises have occurred but have limitations. These maps include:

- [CLIMAtlantic’s Network Map](#) (focused on climate adaptation only)
- [Engage Nova Scotia’s SDG Map](#) (focused on Nova Scotia only)
- [Tamarack Community Climate Transitions Cohort](#) for Nova Scotia (completed six years ago and focused on Halifax Regional Municipality only)

There is no current comprehensive map of who is doing what to advance environmental action across Atlantic Canada.



## Specific funding opportunities

Tangible mapping exercises that would bring the most benefit include:

- **Funding to map grassroots environmental organizations:** This could help groups learn from each other, support each other's work at a regional scale, and foster collaboration. This effort can also help other funders identify specific effective grassroots environmental groups to support what otherwise would remain unknown.
- **Funding to expand existing maps:** This could help groups disseminate and share learnings. There may be ways to build on the CLIMAtlantic map to include other organizations that are not explicitly focused on climate action, or to expand Engage Nova Scotia's SDG Map to the rest of Atlantic Canada.

This mapping exercise should:

- **Be clear upfront on audience and purpose:** Is the map for social impact actors to learn more about environmental groups? Is the goal for grassroots environmental groups to learn about each other? Is it for universities to better understand local actors? This will shape the map so that it does not try to be everything to everyone and dilute its usefulness.
- **Keep it simple:** Include simple but straightforward details about organizations and individuals—enough to establish contact and quickly assess if it is valuable for someone to reach out.
- **Include the grassroots:** Include not only the usual suspects, but also smaller grassroots organizations working on the frontlines, particularly Indigenous-led, Black-led, and African Nova Scotian-led organizations.
- **Support next steps:** Accompany mapping funding with sustained support for convening and collaboration.

With these insights, funders can be well-equipped to support mapping exercises that can help advance greater collaboration.

## Capacity-building and convening

While mapping key players in advancing environmental action in Atlantic Canada can be a precursor to collaboration and is recommended, it is not required. Funding capacity-building and convening among environmental and social impact organizations with loose connections can still be valuable, although this does risk missing previously unidentified groups if mapping is not done beforehand.

Many individuals engaged for this report cited the need for capacity-building and purpose-driven convening, **particularly between social impact and environmental leaders that may not already be talking to each other**. There are multiple benefits to supporting capacity-building and convening, including:

- **Greater community resilience:** This can be achieved if different social and environmental actors came together more regularly to learn from and support each other. This is particularly true among non-profits that do not yet see themselves playing a traditional environmental role (e.g., organizations on the frontline of disaster relief like United Way chapters, faith-based institutions, mutual aid networks, etc.).
- **A shared strategy for advocacy and public policy:** By coming together and having a shared understanding of how everyone's work impacts others, there can be a stronger, shared approach to public policy and advocacy. This can bring in additional support for environmental policies among the social impact sector that otherwise may not be supportive (e.g., immigrant refugee services that are unprepared for climate refugees may become supportive of climate mitigation policies when they may otherwise feel this is out of scope; anti-poverty and affordable housing organizations may be supportive of energy efficiency initiatives; etc.).

## Specific funding opportunities

- **Fund regular gatherings and capacity-building for organizations in both the traditional 'social impact' and 'environmental' spaces** to connect and learn from each other, strengthen each other's respective work, identify funding opportunities, and advance shared public policy and advocacy opportunities.
- **Fund a 'climate connector' role** among potential convening bodies to host events, support organizations working on environmental action, and identify opportunities for deeper collaboration.
- **Fund people's time** to attend convenings to increase diversity of attendees. This is particularly true for grassroots environmental leaders that may otherwise not have the time and capacity to connect.
- **Provide sustained funding**, not just for one convening, but several over a year or more. Building trust takes time.
- **Fund evaluation work.** Monitoring and evaluation are not always included in convening work but is helpful to share learnings.
- **Fund multiple retreats for environmental leaders** to rest and renew, particularly among racialized, grassroots environmental leaders. Burnout is a real cause for talent leaving critical environmental justice work.

These opportunities are based on the following insights.

## Connecting the environmental and social impact sectors

In Atlantic Canada, there are many grassroots environmental organizations. However, as with many areas of the country, there is still a strong divide between traditional environmental organizations and social

impact organizations. This became particularly clear in the response to recent climate disasters experienced in the region, such as Hurricane Fiona, and the Tantallon and Shelbourne Wildfires.

In the aftermath of these disasters, community groups, churches, local United Way chapters, and mutual aid networks immediately helped those affected. However, few would say their work was a 'climate response'. Even in the aftermath, programs to make homes more hurricane-proof or fire resistant (e.g., FireSmart) have not always been framed as climate adaptation.

This silo was further emphasized in the [Atlantic Social Impact Summit hosted in St. John's in September 2023, organized by Common Good Solutions](#), where climate change was not on the agenda. While there is a high awareness among social impact organizations that climate change is happening, there is a large gap in understanding how they can contribute to climate action.

This is a challenge because it means the social impact sector is unprepared for climate change impacts on their organizations. Additionally, they miss opportunities for funding by not having their work recognized as climate work where appropriate (e.g., organizations that help prepare homeowners for disasters are doing climate adaptation work).

At the same time, the environmental sector needs to learn from the social impact sector and focus communications on what people value and care about—which may mean the environment is a co-benefit in a larger conversation about affordability or food security. Energy efficiency initiatives, for example, are increasingly securing funding by focusing on the affordability angle and listing emissions reductions as a co-benefit.

We are past the point where the environment is separate from the social. We need intersectional approaches where organizations may have a primary focus area, but also understand how their work intersects across environmental, social, and economic challenges and solutions. We need environmental groups to focus on the big picture and use communications tactics that resonate best with audiences, even if that means focusing on social or economic priorities instead of the environment. Convening environmental and social impact organizations together could bring them closer to this understanding and foster solution-building.

## Challenges with capacity-building and convening

If this work can lead to strengthened outcomes for all involved, why is it not happening at the level required? Current challenges include:

- **Lack of resources:** Some networks and organizations are led by one person or by volunteers, which hinders capacity to convene.
- **Capacity challenges from staff:** If not paid to attend a convening, it can be hard to justify amidst many competing priorities. Burnout is very prevalent in the non-profit sector in Atlantic Canada at this time.
- **Lack of partnership/collaborative mindset:** Scarcity mindset, and the attitude of 'staying in your lane' is still common. There are some gaps in understanding in the social impact space about why



or how the environment matters to their organizations. There is resistance from some environmental organizations to not have the environment front and centre in any advocacy or program.

- **Cost of in-person travel among provinces:** This is particularly true in Newfoundland and Labrador where flights are often required, and for Prince Edward Island where the cost to cross the Confederation Bridge alone is \$50.

## Potential convenors for funders to support

### Atlantic Canada

- The new [Atlantic Canada Climate Network](#) could play a central convening role. At the time of writing, it is run by one person, an employee of The Climate Reality Project Canada in New Brunswick. As of fall 2024, it has launched both a monthly virtual Community of Practice for climate professionals, and a monthly virtual Community of Advocacy for Atlantic Canada residents. With larger, sustained funding, the Atlantic Canada Climate Network could play a larger convener role and host in-person events.
- [SeaBlue Canada](#) is a network to foster ocean conservation and is made up of some of the largest environmental charities in Canada, including two Atlantic Canada environmental charities (Ecology Action Centre and East Coast Environmental Law). The organization would be well positioned to foster broader collaboration around ocean conservation.

### Nova Scotia

- The [Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia \(IONS\)](#) is one of 14 recognized '[sector councils](#)' in the province, representing all non-profits and charities in Nova Scotia. They are interested in exploring how they might play a larger role in the response to climate change, and convening is part of their strategic mandate. However, due to staff capacity restraints, they have not made this a priority in their work to date. With the right resources they could be very well positioned to convene the social impact sector and environmental actors, perhaps convening with the well-known environmental charity [Ecology Action Centre](#) on shared learning and goals in Nova Scotia. With new leadership coming to IONS in 2024, this could be an opportunity to explore further.
- [Ecology Action Centre](#) is a well-respected grassroots environmental charity that has partnered with many sectors to advance environmental action. They would be well positioned to host convenings that connect social and environmental non-profits.

### New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island

- [CLIMAtlantic](#) does regional convening work and has a strong presence in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. They could easily host convenings on Prince Edward Island for this work.

## Newfoundland and Labrador

- The [Coalition for a Just Recovery NL](#) is starting up again after several years thanks to some recently secured philanthropic support. With additional funds, this coalition could engage in wider convenings and capacity-building efforts.
- The [Mixed Coast Collective](#) is an organization focused on community building and strategic planning and is also involved in just transition conversations. They are well connected with local BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.
- The [Harris Centre at Memorial University in St. John's](#) often plays a regional convening role in Newfoundland and Labrador, given there are no regional governments in the province. Several years ago the Centre led an extensive community engagement program on the [just transition](#) and they are well positioned to lead additional community engagement work between environmental and social impact actors.

## 2. Impact investing opportunities

Another significant opportunity for advancing environmental action in Atlantic Canada is impact investing. This was mentioned in EFC's "[Growing Environmental Philanthropy in Atlantic Canada](#)" report from ten years ago, and the interest in impact investing has only grown since then.

However, unlike in larger provinces such as Ontario or British Columbia, there are fewer public opportunities for investment. Opportunities will arise through conversations and relationship-building with organizations.

Impact investing can take many forms, but may be structured as loans, bonds, debt, or other financial instruments. Many individuals cited the need for more creative impact investing in the region beyond grants and cited specific examples where impact investing could support their organization. For those owning properties, a funder could agree to take on part or all of a mortgage or offer loans at lower rates than financial institutions to get a project started.

### Specific funder opportunities

- **Purchase order financing:** A specific loan that would have wide-ranging positive impacts is purchase order financing—a short-term loan to offset liquidity challenges. Some organizations that receive federal funding work on a reimbursement model, where they must spend the money first. This was a significant barrier for one of the organizations interviewed for this report as they faced a \$1 million cash flow gap. This is a perfect low-risk impact investing opportunity for funders, where a funder can offer a lower loan rate than a financial institution. Alternatively, funders can also address this through a grant to an organization which is reallocated to other areas of work once the organization is reimbursed.
- **Community-led funds:** There is a growing number of community-led micro-lending funds in Atlantic Canada. Funders could offer additional funding to grow the number of potential loans, or

funders could make additional loans to social purpose organizations chosen. Examples include [LIFT](#) (Lunenburg Country Microlending) in Nova Scotia and [Kaleidoscope](#) in New Brunswick.

- **Building the field:** Because the ecosystem is not as developed as in some other provinces, there is a role for funders to play in supporting the development of impact funds that advance environmental action. None of the federal [Social Finance Fund wholesalers](#) are from Atlantic Canada and there is no focused attention on the region for this funding. There is still significant work to do to prepare environmental groups to be investment ready.

### 3. Indigenous sovereignty

*Land Back is “about the decision-making power. It’s about self-determination for our Peoples here that should include some access to the territories and resources in a more equitable fashion, and for us to have control over how that actually looks.”*

*Jesse Wentz, Journalist*

The third recommended opportunity for environmental action is also deeply tied to justice, reconciliation, and reparations.

In the last ten years, Indigenous sovereignty in the form of the Land Back movement across Canada has grown significantly as more individuals, organizations, municipalities, and funders recognize this as a form of reparation. At the same time, there is a growing recognition among environmental funders and the federal government that [Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship for both land and water is a critical strategy for addressing climate change and biodiversity](#).

#### Recent Indigenous-led conservation examples include:

- In January 2024, [the Government of Canada transferred 2 million square kilometres of land and water to Nunavut](#).
- In December 2023, [the Government of Canada announced \\$800 million to go towards four Indigenous-led conservation projects, through the Project Finance for Permanence model](#).
- In October 2023, [British Columbia announced a \\$300 million Conservation Financing Mechanism with \\$150 million in seed funding from the province and another \\$150 million to be raised by BC Parks](#). The funding will go towards new conservation measures that are led or supported by First Nations.
- In April 2023, [the Nature Conservancy of Canada bought Kwesawe'k Island](#) in Prince Edward Island to transfer to the Epekwitk Assembly of Councils.

The transfer of land and waters back to Indigenous governance is not only about justice, reconciliation, and reparations. It also ensures Indigenous people will steward these lands to protect and grow biodiversity, and to advance climate adaptation and mitigation solutions.



The Land Back movement is a particularly strong climate action strategy in Atlantic Canada, where the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik people never gave up their land under the series of Peace and Friendship Treaties signed in the 1700s. The treaties guaranteed the signatories and their descendants rights to hunt, fish, and use the land as they had for centuries prior. Land Back is especially relevant in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, where there are high percentages of privately-owned land and where owners can make Land Back transfers on their own to Indigenous entities.

Philanthropy has a role to play in amplifying Indigenous and settler voices about the importance of advancing Indigenous sovereignty, sharing success stories, and providing capital in the form of impact investing or grants.

*“Land Back is certainly one of the most exciting and hopeful changes that I’m seeing.”*

*Daimen Hardie, Executive Director, Community Forests International*

## Specific funding opportunities

- **A new Indigenous-led land trust:** There is a new [Mi'kmaq-led land trust](#) for Nova Scotia that is an incorporated non-profit and seeking charitable status. The [Sespite'tmnej Kmitkinu Conservancy](#) began as a partnership between multiple organizations. It is led by the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs and is coordinated through the Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn Negotiation Office, Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission, and Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources. Funding given to this Indigenous land trust goes towards purchasing new land to steward, land assessments to explore sustainable economic opportunities on the land, communications efforts, and operations.
- **Oceans North:** [Oceans North](#) works with Indigenous partners across the Arctic and Atlantic Canada to advance Indigenous-led marine conservation. The organization conducts policy and research work, data monitoring, and public education with Indigenous partners. While focused on the Arctic, the organization is based in Halifax and does work in the Atlantic Ocean.
- **Ulnooweg:** [Ulnooweg](#) is comprised of three organizations, including the Ulnooweg Indigenous Communities Foundation (a public foundation), the Ulnooweg Education Centre (an education and research charity), and Ulnooweg Development Group Inc. (a non-profit organization that supports Indigenous entrepreneurs and community enterprises). Ulnooweg supports the needs of Indigenous people across Atlantic Canada by securing resources, providing technical and professional services, delivering a range of innovative educational and research programs, and building bridges between Indigenous communities and the world of philanthropy. Ulnooweg can support funders in numerous ways to advance Indigenous sovereignty, including:
  - Connecting funders with specific Indigenous bands that are qualified donees, if a funder wishes to donate to a specific band to support Land Back purchases.

- Supporting the funding needs at [Asitu'lisk](#), including operations, maintenance, facility improvements, educational programs, mortgage, and other costs. This example is further explored below.



Figure 1: Grandmother Maple (over 500 years old). Credit: Dana Decent, used with permission from Ulnooweg.

## Asitu'lisk is an example of advancing environmental action through Land Back.

[Asitu'lisk](#) is a nearly 200-acre property located close to Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. It is largely forested and contains some of the last old growth forests in Nova Scotia, including a maple tree dated to over 500 years old known as 'Grandmother Maple' (see photo). The land was given to German settlers in the 1840s for farming and forestry and was transferred to the Drescher family in 1990. The Dreschers named the property Windhorse Farm. They spent three decades stewarding the land, and creating gathering spaces, cabins, permaculture, and trails.

In 2021, the Dreschers transferred ownership of the land to Ulnooweg Education Centre through a combination of purchase and gift. ([Watch this video](#), an illustrated story of this Land Back example.)

Ulnooweg Education Centre now operates the property to steward the lands and create educational programming year-round.

Since the transfer, Ulnooweg has had to address a climate-related challenge at Asitu'lisk: the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) that threatens to destroy old growth hemlocks. The HWA has been gradually increasing its range northwards as temperatures rise. Hemlocks are a keystone species, the tallest conifers in the forest, and play a vital ecological function. In addition, the needles, roots, and stems can all be used for various health purposes. The HWA kills 95% of hemlocks it infects.

To protect hemlocks at Asitu'lisk, Ulnooweg organized a rapid response in 2023, quickly reaching a decision on the best course of action, developing a plan, fundraising thousands of dollars, and securing a team of over 100 volunteers. The plan involved a mix of inoculation for specific trees, biological control, and forest management for areas that would not be inoculated. Partnering with Community Forests International to deliver the inoculation program, the team was able to save over 4,050 hemlocks.

This is a prime example of climate adaptation in action, led by Indigenous peoples. It is the largest hemlock care plan in Atlantic Canada, and—in the words of Daimen Hardie, CEO of Community Forests International—work like this is “the best evidence of why Indigenous-led conservation can be so transformational.” It is unlikely that without this leadership, the hemlock inoculation program would have happened so quickly and with such strong community support. ([Read this 2024 write up in the Narwhal.](#))

For 2024 and beyond, there are funding needs to continue the hemlock protection program, and for Asitu'lisk overall, as listed above. There are also impact investing opportunities, such as loans and taking on part of the mortgage at Asitu'lisk.

## 4. Ocean conservation

Atlantic Canada has 42,000 km of coastline, and ocean-related industries represent a significant portion of the region's economies. The region is home to [60% of Canada's ocean tech](#), and [fishing and fish processing accounted for \\$1.5 billion in economic output](#) in 2022. Most people in Atlantic Canada live near coasts and have a strong relationship with the ocean. Especially given the cod collapse of the early 1990s, there's a strong interest in protecting ocean resources and managing them responsibly.

There is also deep scientific expertise and research capabilities at ocean tech ventures and academic institutions. Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador, Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, and the University of Prince Edward Island are all well known for ocean and coastal research. There are also unique carbon storage projects happening in the region, including the global [Carbon to Sea Initiative](#) that is supported by a range of philanthropic organizations.

At the same time, there are growing pressures on Atlantic coasts. This includes a growing population, offshore wind developments that need strong environmental assessment processes, the growth of aquaculture projects, and a [lack of accessibility](#) and coastal protection. For example, in Nova Scotia, the provincial government passed the Coastal Protection Act in 2019, but five years later decided to remove it and [place the burden of action on local governments and landowners](#).

### Specific funding opportunities

- Funders interested in ocean conservation—and the related climate and biodiversity benefits—can find a promising landscape in Atlantic Canada. This can include supporting non-profits, research institutions, Indigenous-led partnerships, and specific projects across the region.
- Local organizations such as [Ecology Action Centre](#), [East Coast Environmental Law](#), [SeaBlue Canada](#), [COVE](#), and [UInooweg Development Group](#) can be useful to connect with. National and international organizations such as [Oceans North](#), [WWF](#), [Oceana](#), and the Atlantic chapters of [Sierra Club Canada](#) and [Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society](#) also do significant ocean conservation work in different provinces across the region.

## 5. Building clean economies

Across Canada, there is a need for a sustainable, just, and equitable transition to clean energy. This will not happen overnight but will require targeted and sustained investment from all sectors. The philanthropic sector has a significant role to play, both in supporting efforts to oppose extractive projects and in supporting policy, advocacy, collaborations, and projects to advance the just transition.

In particular, Newfoundland and Labrador is a prime location to build a clean economy, given its reliance on oil, gas, and other natural resources. [The oil and gas sector forms 25% of the province's GDP and 40% of its exports](#). The province is also highly susceptible to climate change. There is growing international and national interest in advancing a just transition in Newfoundland and Labrador. [The Coalition for a Just Recovery NL](#) is getting started again after a dormant phase the last several years.

## Specific funding opportunities

- **Build on momentum to grow political power for a clean energy economy** in Newfoundland and Labrador ahead of the November 2025 provincial election. [Neighbours United](#) has secured a \$275,000 grant for a multi-year deep canvassing project in swing ridings, using an empathy-based door canvassing approach to advance progressive policies. With additional funding, Neighbours United could expand this project and have greater impact.
- **Support community engagement for building a clean economy.** Dr. Angela Carter and the [Harris Centre at Memorial University](#) are well-positioned to do this work, and the Harris Centre could build on their [just transition work](#) from several years ago. The work could also test different communications messages to see what resonates best (e.g., not mentioning climate change, but focusing on affordability; replacing “just transition” with “building a clean economy”; etc.).
- **Fund evaluation of the aforementioned work to create case studies** that are immediately applicable to several other provinces in Canada, as well as worldwide. Investments in this area in Newfoundland and Labrador could have far-ranging impacts beyond the province to advance environmental action.

## 6. Advancing policy and advocacy

To advance environmental action in Atlantic Canada, we need strong pro-environmental policies and advocacy. Philanthropy has a key role to play in advancing this work, particularly as advocacy is harder to secure government funding for. While policy engagement and advocacy work have been mentioned throughout the report, some specific opportunities are presented below.

### Specific funding opportunities

- **Support building power:** Newfoundland and Labrador has a provincial election scheduled in November 2025. Philanthropy could play a role in building power in influential ridings to support progressive environmental policies. Philanthropy can also support collaboration among labour and environmental groups to advance shared understanding.
- **Support campaigns:** Because of the high poverty rates and rising costs in the region, funding policy and advocacy work that does not explicitly mention climate change but focuses on affordability, food security, energy security, and the theme of self-reliance may be more successful. Funders can support multiple campaigns with key environmental and social impact leaders in the region to test messaging and advance pro-environmental policies.
- **Support convenings and coalition building between the social and environmental sectors:** As outlined earlier, by bringing diverse community sectors together and having a shared understanding of each other’s work, there can be a stronger, shared approach to public policy and advocacy to advance environmental action. This can result in a social impact sector that is more supportive of environmental policies and advocacy.

- **Support convenings with government:** Given the need for convening both the environmental and social impact sectors, funders can support convenings with government officials and local leaders, particularly in the lead up to elections. There is often limited funding for this kind of work.
- **Support national policies and advocacy that support Atlantic Canada:** This could look like working with national organizations to support their work that benefits Atlantic Canada. It could also look like funding specific local engagement that informs national policy.

## Conclusion

More than at any other moment in history, Atlantic Canada is experiencing significant economic momentum that brings with it both opportunities and challenges. Funders that focus on some of the six areas mentioned in this report can have a meaningful impact with ripples of change for years to come. We all need to do everything we can to create a just and sustainable future. Investing in Atlantic Canada will provide opportunities to do just that.



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# Appendix: Potential grantees mentioned in the report

**Atlantic Canada Climate Network (ACCN)** ([www.atlanticcanadaclimatenetwork.ca](http://www.atlanticcanadaclimatenetwork.ca))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Capacity-building and convening

**Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (Atlantic Chapter)** ([www.cpaws.org/about/our-people/chapters/](http://www.cpaws.org/about/our-people/chapters/))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

**CLIMAtlantic** ([www.climatlantic.ca](http://www.climatlantic.ca))

New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island

Funding opportunity identified: Capacity-building and convening

**Coalition for a Just Recovery NL** ([www.justrecoverynl.ca](http://www.justrecoverynl.ca))

Newfoundland and Labrador

Funding opportunity identified: Capacity-building and convening

**COVE** ([www.coveocean.com](http://www.coveocean.com))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

**East Coast Environmental Law** ([www.ecelaw.ca](http://www.ecelaw.ca))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

**Ecology Action Centre** ([www.ecologyaction.ca](http://www.ecologyaction.ca))

Nova Scotia

Funding Opportunity Identified: Capacity-building and convening; Ocean conservation

**Harris Centre at Memorial University** ([www.mun.ca/harriscentre](http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre))

Newfoundland and Labrador

Funding Opportunity Identified: Capacity-building and convening; Building clean economies

**Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia (IONS)** ([www.ions.ca](http://www.ions.ca))

Nova Scotia

Funding Opportunity Identified: Capacity-building and convening

**Kaleidoscope** ([www.kaleidoscopeimpact.com](http://www.kaleidoscopeimpact.com))

New Brunswick

Funding Opportunity Identified: Impact investing

**LIFT (Lunenburg Country Microlending)** ([www.liftlc.ca](http://www.liftlc.ca))

Nova Scotia

Funding Opportunity Identified: Impact investing

**Neighbours United** ([www.neighboursunited.org](http://www.neighboursunited.org))

Newfoundland and Labrador

Funding opportunity identified: Building clean economies

**Oceana** ([www.oceana.org](http://www.oceana.org))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

**Oceans North** ([www.oceansnorth.org](http://www.oceansnorth.org))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Indigenous sovereignty; Ocean conservation

**SeaBlue Canada** ([www.seabluecanada.org/about](http://www.seabluecanada.org/about))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Capacity-building and convening; Ocean conservation

**Sespite'tmnej Kmitkinu Conservancy** ([www.cmmns.com](http://www.cmmns.com))

Nova Scotia

Funding opportunity identified: Indigenous sovereignty

**Sierra Club Canada (Atlantic Chapter)** ([www.sierraclub.ca/chapters/atlantic](http://www.sierraclub.ca/chapters/atlantic))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

**The Mixed Coast Collective** ([www.themccnl.com](http://www.themccnl.com))

Newfoundland and Labrador

Funding opportunity identified: Capacity-building and convening

**UInooweg** ([www.ulnooweg.ca](http://www.ulnooweg.ca))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Indigenous sovereignty; Ocean conservation

**WWF- Canada** ([www.wwf.ca](http://www.wwf.ca))

Atlantic Canada

Funding opportunity identified: Ocean conservation

## About the author

Dana Decent is a sustainability professional with over 10 years of experience working on climate change, sustainability, and partnership building across the non-profit, academic, corporate and philanthropic sectors. In the capacity of creating this report in 2023, Dana operated as an independent consultant to gather insights and write the report. Dana currently works as a Program Director, Climate and Health at Definity Insurance Foundation, and lives in Halifax.

## About Environment Funders Canada

Environment Funders Canada (EFC) is a national network of philanthropic foundations and other funders working individually and collectively to advance a healthy environment and a sustainable future for Canada. EFC catalyzes funders to respond to environmental crises with ambitious and innovative solutions. EFC **members** work with non-government organizations, community groups and other charitable organizations to support the development and delivery of programs that can make our communities healthier and more resilient, while protecting vital ecosystem services and the natural world.

Environment Funders Canada  
c/o Foundation House  
2 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 300  
Toronto, ON M4T 2T5  
647.288.8891  
[www.environmentfunders.ca](http://www.environmentfunders.ca)

