

Sheila Cole keeps working for change

BY SARAH SAWLER

MLAs in the Nova Scotia Legislature listened in April as environment minister Iain Rankin recognized longtime environmental activist Sheila Cole for three decades of work. The proclamation also celebrated Cole's Eco-Hero Lifetime Achievement Award, received from the Nova Scotia Environmental Network in November.

Rankin gave Cole the news in January. "It was a total and delightful surprise," Cole says. "A couple of colleagues and I were meeting with the minister... at the end of the meeting, the minister's executive assistant asked if I would mind if they recognized me in the legislature."

Her environmental efforts began with positions on the boards of the Ecology Action Centre, the Environmental Health Association of Nova Scotia, and the Nova Scotia Environmental Network.

But as years passed, she became increasingly involved in international work, including presenting at four World Urban Forums as a member of the Health Caucus of the Canadian Environmental Network. Two years ago, she also presented at the UN's Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador (see halifaxmag.com/cityscape/sheila-cole-warns-halifaxs-decision-makers/ from the *Halifax Magazine* archives), the United Nations every-twenty-years conference on housing and sustainable development.

Now, she's decided to shift her focus, spending less time on administration tasks. "What I am remaining involved in is all of the policy work that I love to do," says Cole. "I'm on the Nova Scotia Roundtable on Environment, and Sustainable Prosperity. That's a big piece. It reports directly to the Minister."

She'll also be continuing her involvement with the federal government's Chemicals Management Plan and National Pollutant Release Inventory, among other things. "It's time for me to take my knowledge and experience to a broader audience, and this will be through writing, and so forth, but mostly through public speaking," says Cole.

Reaching a broader audience is key to driving the change Cole wants to see. "We need a lot of people coming on board to shift things in the world," she says. "I find that [public speaking] is a great way to inspire and educate people on a range of environmental issues... I'm a solutions-based person, and I like to

help people by demystifying some of the overwhelming information that is out there."

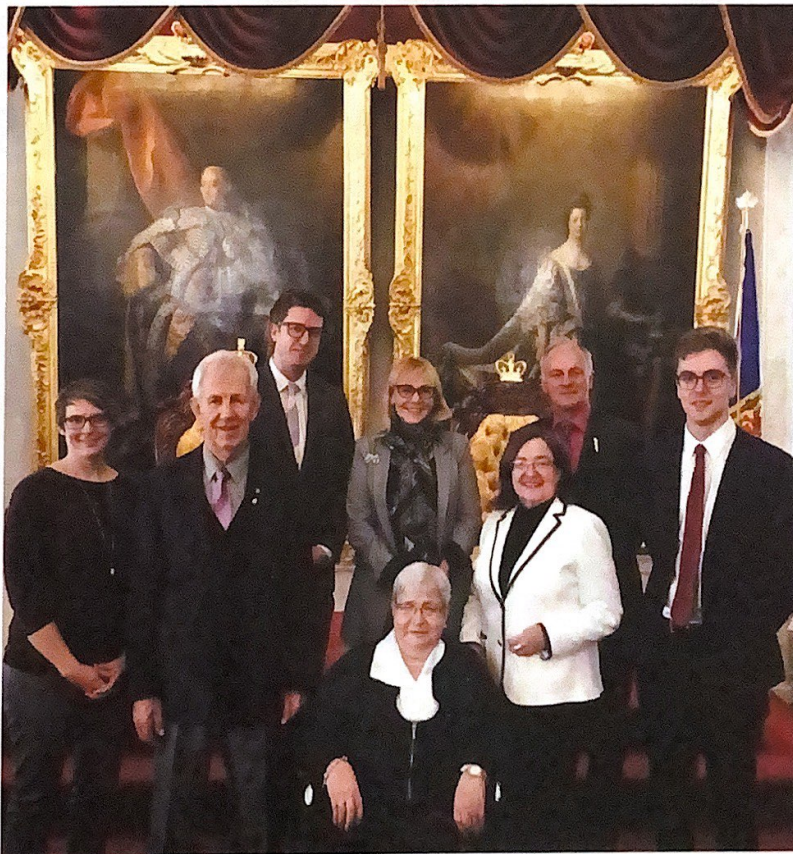
One of the topics she spends a lot of time on is the relationship between human health and the environment. Lately, these kinds of discussions have become fairly mainstream, but it's taken time and work from activists like Cole to get to this point.

"I was one of the founding members of the wilderness committee at the Ecology Action Centre," says Cole. "We had several scientists on this committee. And so, I would be talking about health related to the forests, and this person would say, 'Why are you always talking about health? We're talking about wilderness preservation.' And so, I found that even the environmentalists weren't getting the depth of the interconnection."

It's possible that we're starting to talk about these things as a society because, at this point, we have no choice. "I think we're at this moment in time, as the human race, where we are challenged with transitioning through our relationship to the Earth, and our survival as a species," Cole says.

She believes there's hope, if we all buckle down together. "I like to work with the opportunities where the light shines in on things," says Cole. "If I did not believe that we were capable of turning the ship around, I would not be doing this work." ■

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Sheila Cole (third from the right) was feted at Province House for her environmental research and activism.