

# West Coast lightstations: Beacons in purgatory



Carmanah Point Lightstation (above) and Estevan Point Lightstation, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, are still staffed. The latter is a vintage flying-buttruss design.



**T**o staff, or not to staff, is no longer the question regarding Canada's remaining inhabited lightstations, 27 of which are on the British Columbia coast. Three decades ago, the Canadian Coast Guard concluded that marine navigation didn't require people on lightstations, then eliminated keepers from 80 per cent of its 264 stations before public pressure compelled politicians to stop the process in 1998. But the issue remained on the coast guard's radar as it struggled to stay afloat on a deflating budget.

Today, the coast guard continues to believe that advances in technology eliminated any operational reason to continue staffing lightstations, and that while this seemingly catches lightkeepers in a time-warp of sorts, it isn't concerned about nostalgia.

Controversy over the permanence of the 1998 cessation ranges from briefly, to indefinitely, to no more de-staffing under a Liberal federal government. "Politics plays a part," said Dan Bate, coast guard communications officer. "We've been told not to continue de-staffing."

British Columbia mariners variously support or oppose de-staffing, with some surprised to learn that Canada still has people on lightstations.

"That technology is advanced enough to replace people is a flawed rationale," said Laurie MacBride, executive director, Georgia Strait Alliance. "Automated weather reports aren't useful or reliable. Boaters could make wrong decisions with tragic results."

Others agree that automation is not yet up to the task, believing that nothing replaces the value of a person looking out at the conditions and reporting them – particularly sea state and visibility.

Previously, lightkeepers also provided aviation weather information. Now, they aren't permitted to do so for liability reasons, and because it falls outside their marine mandate. Some north coast commercial aviators are concerned about losing this source of vital information, which helps them decide when and where to safely fly along the wild Pacific coast.

Organizations connected to big ships, equipped with top-notch technology and guided by marine pilots, don't believe staffed lightstations are important for safe navigation. Instead, such groups are more concerned about how quickly lights get repaired when needed, which would likely be immediate with a resident keeper, rather than days or weeks waiting for a helicopter or ship to deliver a technician.

As a cost-cutting measure, contracting-out the servicing of navigational aids has been considered, as has outright divestiture. Contracted servicing is being done on Canada's East Coast, but the idea doesn't float well on the



Egg Island Lightstation, on the edge of Queen Charlotte Sound near Cape Caution, on B.C.'s mainland central coast. Its light is atop the tower at right. The helipad is the former site of the actual lightstation, destroyed by storm wind and 25-metre seas in 1948 in which there were no fatalities. The station is still staffed.

West Coast, Mr. Bate said.

"The concept works in a limited way on the East Coast due to the buoys' closer location to shore," he said. "It's not likely to happen on the West Coast because the greater distances and larger buoys require bigger ships. The challenge is to find someone who can do the job at the costs associated with it. To date, the only divestiture is a single aid that was acquired by a yacht club in



View from a Canadian Coast Guard Bell 212 helicopter flying on a supply run along B.C.'s rugged coast, where most lightstations are accessible only by helicopter or ship. Lightkeepers' groceries, mail and supplies are often delivered via helicopter.

British Columbia."

Besides technological advancements aboard ships and on navigational aids, saving money is another reason cited by the coast guard for de-staffing. It once estimated that operating the remaining staffed lightstations uses about half of the total budget for British Columbia's 2,000 navigational aids.

There has been dispute among keepers, politicians, the coast guard and bureaucrats as to the real cost of operating staffed lightstations – fuelled somewhat by the federal auditor-general's conclusion in 2002 that the coast guard didn't know the cost of staffed lightstations, or even if it received appropriate funding for them.

Whatever the real cost is, when de-staffing is complete, substantial expenses will continue, according to lightstation advocate Senator Pat Carney. "You still need helicopters, ships and capital expenditures," she said.

From 1998 to 2003, \$25 million was spent to rejuvenate West Coast lightstations. Reportedly, the work was done to catch up on maintenance neglected in anticipation of de-staffing; to restore safe working and living conditions; to update sites to meet current codes; and to protect the coast guard's large investment in the stations. The substantial renova-

tions were engineered to last another quarter-century.

The West Coast project team employed 180 coast guard staff and contractors hauling 11 million kilograms of materials to the sites. The jobs included environmental and archaeological studies; new fuel storage systems; refurbished helipads; upgraded communications; new roofs; new fuel-efficient generators; and rehabilitation of contaminated soil. The work was further complicated by over 300 occurrences of endangered plants and animals on the lightstations.

The coast guard languishes with inadequate funding – reportedly a 22 per cent budget cut between 1998 and 2002. "We can't afford everything," said John Adams when he was coast guard commissioner (that top spot is currently vacant). "We're trying to do more than is possible with the resources available."

Some mariners groups believe that the federal government is overdue spending money on the coast guard, and want an inquiry into the erosion of its funding.

In 2003, to find ways to live within its waning budget, the department was required to review its priorities, resources and costs, and to report findings and recommendations to the Treasury Board. The review included staffed lightstations, which served at least five essential services: aids to navigation; marine and aviation weather; assistance to mariners and landlubbers; maintenance of automated systems; and services to other

A Canadian Coast Guard B105 helicopter at Pachena Point Lightstation, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The station is still staffed.





Lightkeeper Richard Rose collects package from Canadian Coast Guard Bell 212 helicopter at Quatsino Lightstation, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Groceries, mail and supplies rely on helicopters – as do medical evacuations, moves to new assignments and going on vacation.

government agencies. It was felt that over time the coast guard took on duties that had nothing to do with its marine mandate, for which it received little or no funding from the agencies that it benefited.

“The report is an internal document, not released to the public,” Mr. Bate said. “Its recommendations are not yet acted upon.”

During 2005, the coast guard emerged from within the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to become its own entity as a special operating agency, a move that is hoped to have a positive effect on funding.

“Our budgets are stabilized now,” Mr. Bate said. “As a stand-alone agency, we have our own budget that is no longer part of DFO.”



Grumman Goose amphibious aircraft at Port Hardy, on northern Vancouver Island, flown by Pacific Coastal Airlines along the central and north coast of B.C. These and other similar commercial aviators are concerned about the loss of aviation weather information that lightstations used to provide – and feel that their safety will be jeopardized if lightstations are de-staffed. Pilots often call the lightstations directly for weather updates while en route. Small floatplanes are the real workhorses that transport people and supplies around B.C.’s coast.



Lennard Island Lightstation, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Lightkeeper Iain Colquhoun, atop light tower, looks out over his foggy, rocky domain.

The coast guard’s stated priorities are to firstly serve major commercial traffic; then, a secondary commercial group including fishermen; then pleasure boaters. Its belief is that due to improved technology, modern recreational boaters and newer commercial fishermen don’t need staffed lightstations – and that all mariners have a responsibility to be capable and equipped.

Lightkeepers earn approximately \$27,000 to \$45,000 annually and work seven days per week. Keepers previously did all the maintenance – lights, buildings, grounds, machinery – but over time these duties were reduced in favour of technicians dispatched from central bases, and some equipment was removed.

Although principal duties focus on operating the station, keepers frequently answer public requests for information or assistance – and some have personally rescued distressed mariners.

What does the future hold for staffed lightstations in the reality of meagre dollars? There’s growing belief that the coast guard should be revamped, including re-staffing and multi-tasking the lightstations.

“Staffed stations are more important than ever for safety and coastal security,” Senator Carney said. “Let’s bring coast guard into the 21st century, fund it, equip it, and train the people to do the job we require today.”



Lightkeeper Will Rose and family ready to depart Egg Island Lightstation for their new assignment, via Canadian Coast Guard Bell 212 helicopter. Moving day for lightkeepers requires coordination of a ship and helicopter. The helicopter slings furniture and effects out to a waiting ship, then people are transported to their new station via