10 Atlantic Canada

Learning Objectives

- To describe the physical and historical geography of Atlantic Canada as a basis for understanding the region's social and economic position in Canada
- To describe and explain Atlantic Canada as an old resource hinterland and as a rejuvenating one
- To examine the prospects for future economic growth in the region
- To outline the crucial importance of the fishing industry and the effects of the cod fishery's collapse on the region and on Newfoundland in particular
- To outline environmental challenges in the Atlantic such as the establishment of hydroelectric projects in Labrador and their impact on traditional lands.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 10 outlines the geographic dimensions and importance of Atlantic Canada—the only region to exhibit declining tendencies today. There are four main themes in this chapter:

1. Atlantic Canada's weak economic position relative to the rest of Canada.
2. The role of physical geography in determining the region's past, present, and future potential.
3. The decline of Atlantic fisheries.
4. The evidence of the region's economic revival.

Atlantic Canada within Canada

Today, Atlantic Canada, an old resource hinterland, continues to suffer from a small, geographically fragmented local market, distance from national and global markets that hampers manufacturing, and a restricted natural resource base. However, oil and gas development, mining, shipbuilding, trade possibilities with Europe, and the possibility of hydro power reaching the Maritimes provide economic optimism.

Atlantic Canada's Population

This region is characterized by a low annual population growth rate and a population size that ranks fifth out of the six Canadian regions.

Atlantic Canada's Physical Geography

The physiographic regions of the Atlantic include the Appalachian Uplands and the Canadian Shield. Weather tends to be variable.

Environmental Challenges/Disasters

This region has faced several environmental challenges including the establishment of hydroelectric projects and their impact on traditional lands including possible mercury poisoning of fish and wildlife; the Sydney tar ponds; and the collapse of the cod fishery.

Atlantic Canada's Historical Geography

As the "first part of North America to be discovered by Europeans" (p. 333), Atlantic Canada had a head start in terms of settlement and economic development. So what accounted for its decline? One factor is physical location, far from the concentrations of people and economic activities in the Great Lakes–St Lawrence Lowlands. Other factors include a small and scattered population and a narrow resource base.

Atlantic Canada Today

The prospect for strong economic growth in this region remains elusive. Low oil and ore prices hamper mining and offshore oil and gas development, and may force provinces back into the "have-not" category of provinces receiving equalization payments because of the decrease in oil royalties received. The loss of jobs in the Alberta oil sands has brought an end to the Big Commute, but tourism has benefitted from the low Canadian dollar while shellfish fishing and shipbuilding remain the key pillars.

Technical Spearheads

Economic spearheads in Atlantic Canada include the growth of ocean technologies. A market for advanced technology in Newfoundland and Labrador's oil and gas activity as well as in Halifax's shipbuilding has facilitated the move into the knowledge-based economy.

Atlantic Canada's Economic Anchor: The Fishing Industry

Bone outlines the collapse of the cod fishery as a classic example of "the tragedy of the commons" (p. 332)—the kind of ecological disaster that can occur where public control of the resource is unable to exert its power beyond Canada's maritime border. The fishery's collapse has been devastating, especially for Newfoundland, where it has meant the end of a way of life.

Atlantic Canada's Resource Wealth

In 2014, the leading sectors of the resource economy were petroleum, minerals, fishing, agriculture, and forestry (Table 10.4). The ranking could change with petroleum and minerals dropping and fisheries improving. With forestry, the best days for this industry are "long gone" (p. 353) and agriculture is limited with scarce arable land.

Atlantic Canada's Core

Growth has tended to take place in Atlantic Canada's major cities (e.g., Saint John, Moncton, St John's, and Halifax), and at the same time, people are leaving rural Atlantic Canada.

Challenge Questions

1. What developments provided Atlantic Canada with an opportunity to break out of Friedmann's "slow growing" category "based on a declining resource base"? (p. 16)

2. Why does Bone state that the "Big Commute" has passed (Vignette 10.5)? Is this a phenomenon likely to be seen again?
3. How does geography explain why Atlantic Canada has such a dispersed coastal settlement pattern?
4. Why does Georges Bank contain such large, rich fish stocks?
5. "The Lower Churchill hydroelectric project either represents the megaproject of the twenty-first century for Atlantic Canada or a giant white elephant" (p. 340). Which is it? Consider the Churchill Falls experience.
6. Megaprojects have been beneficial to the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador. In what ways can they be negative, from the perspective of regional development?
7. Why are draggers considered a danger to marine life and what have been the implications to the Atlantic fishery?
8. What developments suggest that the dream of an Atlantic Gateway is coming true?
9. Compared to other regions, how would you rank Atlantic Canada's sense of place?
10. What have been the critical developments that have enabled Atlantic Canada to become a "have" region as of 2009?
11. Consider the likelihood of Atlantic Canada's status as a "have region" persisting into the future. How likely is this? What will it take for the region to maintain its "have" status?

Key Terms

Beothuk Aboriginals who hunted and fished on the island of Newfoundland; the last of the Beothuk died in 1829. (p. 333)

Big Commute Air travel by Newfoundland trades workers to and from the Alberta oil sands, on a cycle such as 20 days in Alberta and eight days back home in Newfoundland. (p. 357)

Brent oil price A major trading classification of sweet light crude oil that serves as a major benchmark price for purchases of oil worldwide; named for a North Sea oil field, the Brent price in recent years has been slightly higher than the continental North American West Texas Intermediate price. (p. 348)

Groundfish Fish that live on or near the bottom of the sea. The most valuable groundfish are cod, halibut, and sole. (p. 333)

Gulf Stream Warm ocean current paralleling the eastern coast of North America that flows from the Gulf of Mexico toward Newfoundland. (p. 327)

Hydrometallurgy A process that produces nickel, copper, and cobalt directly from ore (without smelting). (p. 337)

Irish famine The failure of Ireland's principal crop, the potato, between 1845 and 1852. (p. 335)

Labrador Current Cold ocean current flowing south in the North Atlantic from Greenland and Labrador. (p. 327)

Light sweet crude The most highly valued crude oil, which requires little processing. (p. 348)

Nalcor Energy An energy Crown corporation created by the Newfoundland and Labrador government in 2007. Nalcor is responsible for Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro, the Churchill Falls Generating Station, the Lower Churchill Project, oil and gas, and the Bull Arm Fabrication Site. (p. 341)

Nor'easters Strong winds coming in off the North Atlantic from the northeast that bring stormy weather. (p. 327)

Orogeny Mountain-building process. (p. 326)

Port Royal The settlement founded in the summer of 1605 on the north shore of the Annapolis Basin near the mouth of the Annapolis River by a French colonizing expedition led by Pierre du Gua de Monts and Samuel de Champlain. (p. 334)

Scottish Highland clearances Forced displacements of poor tenant farmers in the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (p. 335)

Tragedy of the commons The destruction of renewable resources that are not privately owned, such as fisheries and forests. (p. 332)