

Community Cornerstone: Erica Andrew

By DONNA DANIELLI

There have been some stormy times for the Right Whale, but with friends like Milton's Erica Andrew, the future's bound to look a little better for them and their humpback friends.

Every summer for the last 14 years, Ms. Andrew has volunteered as part of a whale research team on Brier Island, Nova Scotia. Last year she was even made an honorary "Brier Islander".

"I live in a little cabin in the woods when I'm down there, and go out every day on the boats," says Ms. Andrew. "It's a very spiritual experience."

The Right Whale was given its name by early whalers, who considered it the right whale to hunt due to its abundance, accessibility from shore, high oil yield and long baleen (whale bone).

There are an estimated 300 Right Whales left in the world. The waters surrounding Brier Island are a natural home for the Right Whales, Humpbacks and others with the strong tidal currents that bring nutrients close to the water's surface, ensuring a steady supply of plankton. The whales feed on the herring and mackerel that are drawn to feed on the plankton.

"We've identified about a 150 to 200 Humpback Whales around Brier Island," says Ms. Andrew. "They each have a distinctive fluke (underside of their tail), and the Right Whales each have distinctive markings on the front of their heads, and lower and upper jaws."

The whales travel to the Caribbean each year to bear their young, and researchers in the Caribbean photograph the flukes of

the calves and forward the photos to the researchers on Brier Island.

"Each year, it's exciting to see the whales come back and bring their young with them," says Ms. Andrew. "Last year was especially exciting, when we tracked 30 new Right Whale calves. The year before, we only saw one Right Whale calf, so that increase is a really good sign."

The research done on Brier Island and in the Caribbean, allows for the monitoring of population lifespan, breeding habits and more.

Ms. Andrew became interested in the plight of whales, when as a teacher of a Grade Six class of gifted children, she arranged for an expert in whale research to come speak to the class who were studying the book *Whale Song*.

"Then, I was hooked," she says with a laugh. "I spent ten years

going down each summer as a tourist and I've been helping with the research for the last four years. Both my children, Lesley and Rhett have been down with me, and it was a wonderful moment for me when I heard Lesley describe it as having a profound effect on her life."

Ms. Andrew spends the rest of the year as the Halton District School Board Trustee. She is currently serving her second term and credits her 30 year career as a teacher as an important part of the experience she brings to her job.

She constantly reminds the school board of the need to educate students on environmental issues and speaks as an activist on how whales face danger from the fishing industry. Today whales die from collisions from ships or die from entanglement in fishing gear.

"There is a need to balance fishing and food," explains Ms. Andrew, who stresses the need for ships to keep watch for whales, user slower speeds to avoid collisions and perhaps make changes to the existing shipping lanes.

When Ms. Andrew returns to Ontario, don't be surprised to see her at a school near you. She often packs up all her photos, videos and whale research and takes it into Halton classrooms to educate students about the Right and Humpback Whales.

"I love sharing my information with the kids," she says. "The whales are an incredible mammal. They're very communal, and they actually help one another. They act as midwives to another and they communicate together. They're really very clever."

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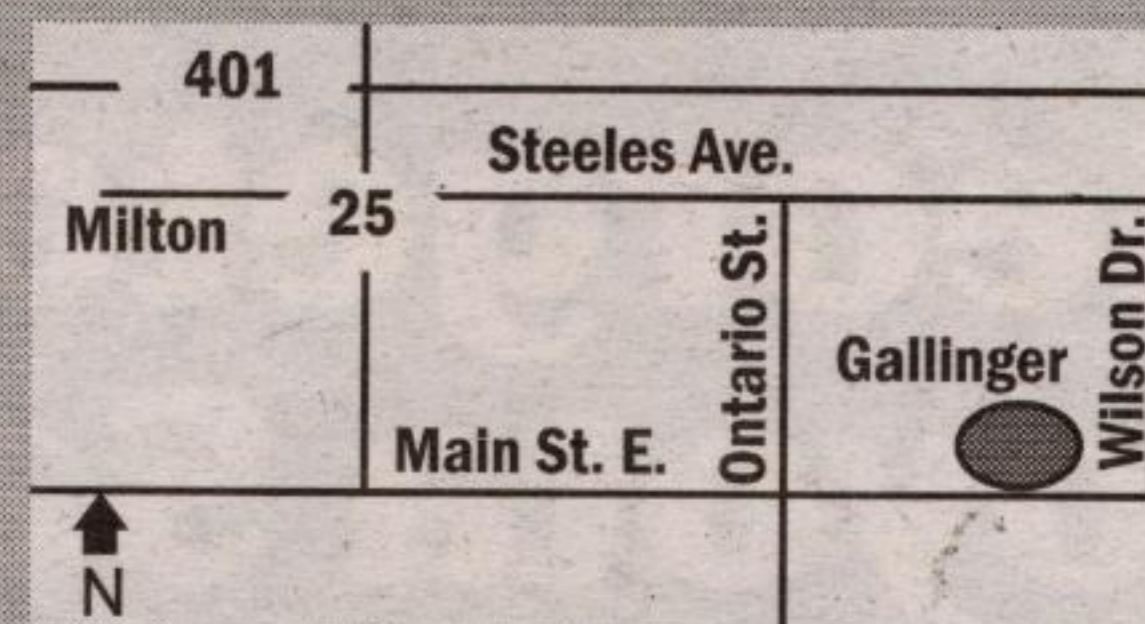
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