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Tuesday, August 18, 2026

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Staffing Canada's lighthouses a costly anachronism

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The lighthouse at Pine Island, B.C. It's time to decommission Canada's 51 staffed lighthouses, writes former diplomat and avid sailor Nick Coghlan. *Photograph courtesy of Nick Coghlan*

OPINION | BY NICK COGHLAN | August 13, 2026 | [Edit](#)



Who doesn't love a lighthouse? There's something about the idea of a beacon of light in the darkness of the storm, showing the way to safety, that is immensely evocative—not to speak of the romance associated with life on a lonely rock by the ocean.

Canada's [51 staffed lighthouses](#)—27 in British Columbia, 23 in Newfoundland and Labrador, and one in New Brunswick—are particularly appealing, their red-and-white ancillary buildings a heartwarming sight to mariners and tourists alike. They are all the responsibility of the Canadian Coast Guard, a special operating agency within the Department of National Defence.



Nick Coghlan, right, with his wife and crew Jenny, with Bosun Bird in the background near Cape Horn, Chile. *Handout photograph*

The staffed light stations are a costly anachronism.

The lights themselves were long ago automated and do not require a human for operation; they are powered by low-maintenance solar panels, like the thousands of other navigational aids maintained by the Coast Guard along our coastlines.

Contrary to popular perception, light keepers play no role in search and rescue operations; they have no relevant training or equipment and, located as they often are on small, exposed islands, most lighthouses would in any case make a poor base for a rescue. Helicopters, fast inflatables and rugged cutters, summoned by radio through a network of towers maintained by the Coast Guard, do the job efficiently and rapidly. Nor do these lighthouses have a useful role in enforcing sovereignty. Powerful radars in strategic locations see much further than any light keeper can. Anomalies are investigated and sovereignty is asserted by fixed-wing aircraft.

The weather reports supplied by the lighthouses on a regular basis, and re-broadcast by Environment Canada via the Coast Guard's radio network, are of some use. In theory they come out every three hours daily.

But this bears qualification. If you're at Port Hardy or Campbell River on Vancouver Island, planning an early fishing outing, you'll have to wait until 9:30 a.m. for the first reports from Pulteney Point and Cape Mudge; these keepers maintain only "regular" working hours.

A quick glance at the charts gives further pause. Why are Dryad Point and Ivory Island—12 miles apart on B.C.'s North Coast—both staffed when there is only one such light station in all of rugged Haida Gwaii? Why is Trial Island, barely 100 metres off Victoria's exclusive Beach Drive, staffed? There is no rhyme or reason for the selection.

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More useful in terms of weather reporting is a network of automated reporting stations that is managed by Environment Canada with logistical support from the Coast Guard. In B.C., buoys tethered to the ocean floor at strategic locations such as South Brooks or West Sea Otter give hourly real-time readings of offshore windspeed, direction, wave heights, and atmospheric pressure. Similar stations on land report from points such as Solander Island (off Cape Cook, the windiest place on the West Coast), Fanny Island (Johnstone Strait), or Cape St. James (the southern tip of Haida Gwaii).

By no means are these stations 100 per cent reliable. Last summer, to my frustration as I waited for a propitious weather forecast for the rounding of Cape Cook under sail, Solander was reporting only wind speed (not direction); Fanny Island, the best indicator of conditions in challenging Johnstone Strait, was recently off-line for 18 months. But the lighthouses aren't reliable either. All too often, in the summer of 2026 reporting from lighthouses has been simply "not available," sometimes for weeks on end.

What would it take for the automated network to fully displace the last useful role being played by the light keepers?

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There is a jurisdictional issue between the two involved federal agencies that is currently limiting the effectiveness of the automated network. Weather forecasting is the prerogative of Environment Canada, which owns and maintains the automated stations. But Environment Canada needs the co-operation (helicopter or surface travel) of the Coast Guard so as to get out on the water to place or fix the hardware. The Coast Guard complains with reason

that it has many competing priorities, that its resources are spread too thin to allow for prompt service; hence the delay in putting Fanny to rights.

This problem could be addressed neatly and with significant savings were the Coasties to be relieved of their responsibility for maintaining those staffed lighthouses. That is to say: decommission them.

Requirements of the Coast Guard currently include recruiting and paying light keepers (typically two for each of 50 stations plus a third "relief," at a salary range of \$50,000 to \$85,000 each, with free housing); transporting them back and forth (often expensively by air); maintaining their homes and associated buildings; and sending in water and fuel by barge. While the lights themselves are solar powered, most of the keepers' quarters still rely on diesel generators.

The United Kingdom paid off its last keeper in 2003. In the United States there is just one. Nova Scotia's lights, including Canada's most famous at Peggy's Cove, were all de-staffed by the early 1990s. In none of these jurisdictions has there been any indication that safety at sea has suffered; in none has a convincing case been made for a policy reversal.

It's past time Canada's lights were de-staffed, scant federal resources saved and the Coastguard allowed to get on with more important (if less romantic) duties. Such as helping Environment Canada fix its defective weather equipment at Fanny and Solander.

Nick Coghlan and his wife Jenny have sailed 70,000 miles offshore in two successive 27-foot sailboats, including several traverses of British Columbia's coastline. His latest book, Under Wide and Starry Skies: 50 Sailing Destinations in Seas Less Travelled, was published in May 2025. Coghlan has served as a Canadian diplomat in six postings overseas.

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