

FIGURE 7.1

Aboiteau Reconstruction, Bay of Kamouraska, 1980



Source: ANQ-Q.

Further diking was brought to a halt, pending a resolution of the problem. In the meantime, the situation became acrimonious as the farmers of the region, constituting the Union des producteurs agricoles de la Côte-du-Sud (Union of Agricultural Producers), found themselves locked in a heated battle with environmentalists over the impact of the *aboiteau* on the salt marshes. Additionally, it became legally unclear who possessed title to the remaining marshes on the Bay of Kamouraska. At that time, there was no public policy concerning the tidal marshes of Quebec, leaving legal decision makers with a number of contradicting agricultural and environmental studies. The Department of the Environment appointed an environmental consulting council to consider the problem. The council found that the marshes in question were in fact the property of the coastal farmers by right of their purchase in 1963. However, the council felt that the decision to build *aboiteaux* was short sighted, given the environmental impact construction would have on the salt marsh ecology.

The Environmental Consulting Council called, therefore, for the Department of Agriculture to make a comprehensive “socioeconomic and environmental impact study” before continuing construction. The result was an ideological impasse where those groups predisposed towards agri-

cultural interests reported substantial economic gains and minimal environmental impact from *aboiteaux* construction, while those predisposed towards an ecological perspective tended to minimise the economic significance of the new *aboiteaux* while arguing that any degradation of the salt marshes represented an “ecological disaster” (Conseil Consultatif, 1979; Michaud, 1980; Corporation des Agronomes, 1982; Fillion, 1982).

Misunderstanding, acrimony, and antagonism ran high between the two camps, each claiming the moral high ground. At one point the coastal farmers of the Bay of Kamouraska were told by the Department of Recreation, Hunting, and Fishing that it viewed the economic value of their marshlands for agricultural purposes as “worth nothing,” certainly not more than \$1.50 per acre. Over the next year debates ensued between the Department of Agriculture, which supported further construction, and the Departments of the Environment and Recreation, which desired to halt construction. The farmers of the Bay of Kamouraska, impatient with the delays and desirous of seeing their *aboiteau* finished before the high tides of autumn, decided to take matters into their own hands. Twenty-three proprietors formed a committee of good faith, and incorporated as the Corporation des Aboiteaux de la Seigneurie de Kamouraska. Together they raised \$10,000, contracted a private firm, and finished the construction work themselves in October of 1980 (Figs. 7.2 and 7.3).

This action was supported by the majority of the population of Kamouraska, who were in favour of the *aboiteau* and its perceived economic value. “Faced with the inaction of the Department of Agriculture, always in conflict with the Department of the Environment on the question of a presumed protection of the salt marshes, the farmers have decided to act,” noted one spokesperson for the Union of Agricultural Producers of the Côte-du-Sud. The farmers ultimately faced no legal repercussions, but their actions brought to light the need for a comprehensive public policy regarding the salt marshes of Kamouraska, and in reality, for all of Quebec (Laberge, 1980a; Laberge, 1980b; Piette, 1980; Piette, 1984; Noreau, 1984).

ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Advocates for the construction of *aboiteaux* in Kamouraska argued that their ecological impact would be minimal, altering only the upper limits of the marsh. Gaétan Gourde, author of the technical and economic report on the *aboiteaux* for the Department of Agriculture, wrote in 1980 that:

Contrary to the idea spread and hawked by certain protectionists of the environment, the dikes are far from representing a conquest of the coasts for agricultural ends; in effect, the low marsh... is not touched, the middle marsh... principal zone of habitation of the aquatic fauna,

FIGURE 7.2

Aerial View of Diked Marshlands, Bay of Kamouraska, 1980



Compare this image of the Bay of Kamouraska with that of 1929 (Fig. 6.5).
Source: MRN.

that the biologists call the faunal nursery, is equally untouched by the work of diking. In truth, the *aboiteaux* are constructed on the edge of the marsh superior, there where the terrestrial land is considered definitive and where the land is part of the plain of agricultural cultivation.

In so writing, Gourde recognised that the flora of the inferior and intermediate marshes was vital to the fauna of the marshlands - especially waterfowl. Nevertheless, he argued that the *aboiteaux* would have little impact on wildlife because of their location on the upper marsh, which, he believed, was not a vital habitat. Waterfowl like geese were capable of adapting to changing environments, he continued, as seen by their frequent feeding in the grain fields of the region. He further stated that the 27.6 km

FIGURE 7.3

Reconstruction of the *Aboiteau* of 1941, Bay of Kamouraska, 1980



Source: ANQ-Q.

of *aboiteaux* then envisaged for the county of Kamouraska were minuscule - representing only three percent of the coastline of the south shore of the estuary. On the contrary, he argued, without *aboiteaux* some of the best farms in the county would lose thirty to forty percent of their land because of insufficient drainage and saltwater inundation. Gourde concluded his defence of the diking, stating that the construction of *aboiteaux* responded to the wishes of the farmers and municipal councils of Kamouraska over the last forty years, and agricultural specialists "since more than a century" (Gourde, 1980: 21-30, 177).

The Association of Biologists of Quebec were quick to challenge Gourde, using a "colonial" discourse to argue the positive socioeconomic value of salt marshes in their natural and ecologically diverse state. Unaltered salt marshes, the ecologists stated, had an economic value greater than that of transformed marshes for agricultural purposes alone. The salt marshes, they argued, had tremendous economic value to the commercial fishery, hunting, and eco-tourism. In addition, they stated that the high marsh plays a more important role in the overall ecology of marshlands than has been previously conceived (Fillion, 1982).