

Bridge Choices; Troubled Waters

By Max Finkelstein

Opinions on a location for a new bridge over the Ottawa River shift like the shores of the alluvial islands in the river. The recent announcement by the National Capital Commission (NCC) naming Kettle Island as the preferred location, after an extensive two-year study involving technically diverse teams, a plethora of consultants and academics, and a multi-disciplinary steering committee, has, not surprisingly, spawned plenty of published articles, opinion pieces and letters to various editors, and a lot of talks over coffee and beers. Emotional pleas have been raised about the loss of opportunities to enjoy nature and beauty along the biking trail and greenspaces that in the words of Environment Minister John Baird, “define Ottawa”. Questions have been raised about the decision-making matrix used to come up with this decision, and how environmental, social, economic and traffic considerations are weighted. Although cost was apparently not initially considered as part of the decision-making matrix, it has been pointed out that it seems more than random coincidence that the preferred decision happens to fall smack-dab on the largest island in the Ottawa River within the National Capital Region, . leading some to further suspect that Kettle Island location may have been, at least in part, selected as a convenient bridge support.

However, little has been said to date about Kettle Island, and just what kind of place it is.

Have you ever been to Kettle Island? The only way to get there (for the moment at least!) is by boat. There is a beach to land on at the western tip, and a small clearing. The rest of the island is dense forest. It’s a great place for a picnic. Kettle Island is the third largest island in the entire Ottawa River watershed, and the largest alluvial island (an alluvial island is formed from shifting sand and silt deposits) in the river. Its shoreline is almost 100% natural, in sharp contrast to the almost 100% altered shorelines on the Ontario and Quebec sides of the river. The rich alluvial soils and mild microclimate have nurtured an exceptional forest ecosystem of trees normally found far to the south – butternuts, hackberries, hickory add to a unique southern blend. Wild rice beds flourish, and map turtles, a species of Special Concern in Ontario, bask, along its undeveloped shores. It is a place of peace and beauty within the city.

The environmental significance of Kettle Island in the Ottawa area is so great that the Nature Conservancy of Canada (also known confusingly as the “NCC”), a private, non-profit group dedicated to protecting Canada’s most important natural treasures acquired more than 95% of the island as a nature reserve in 2007. Most of the land was donated by Bowater, the giant forestry company that owned most of the island. Most of the remainder was purchased in 2008 by the Nature Conservancy. The value of the island is well over one million dollars. The intention of the Nature Conservancy is to manage the island in partnership with the National Capital Commission, Ottawa Riverkeeper, and other agencies. The Nature Conservancy is, in the opinion of many, Canada’s most effective nature conservation organization. It protects significant natural areas by

acquiring them through donation, direct purchase, conservation easements, and other means. The Nature Conservancy has conserved more than 2 million acres of land since its inception in 1962, including lands added to Canada's national parks system, and just this year acquired an natural area in the Selkirk Mountains of BC almost twice the size of Gatineau Park. These guys are serious about conservation.

The Kettle Island location was chosen for the bridge site by the National Capital Commission from among ten final alternatives, which included both bridges and tunnels, in an area stretching from above lac Deschenes in the west, to Masson/Angiers in the east. We are told the analysis of possible crossing locations considered more than traffic issues, and included social and environmental impacts in an objective, science-based process. The choice was based on technical analysis, and not political pressure, or cost, or so we are led to believe. However, you can't put something this big in the city and not ruffle some feathers, fins, leaves and feelings. I'm no traffic expert, nor a sociologist. I'm a paddler, a naturalist, and a person who is intimately familiar with the Ottawa River, so I'll keep my views there, on the water. The Ottawa River encompasses major wetlands and other ecologically significant areas along much of its shores outside the downtown core, and every option has major impacts, both social and environmental.

The decision to name the Kettle Island alternative as the preferred choice leaves me and the rest of us who are concerned about the natural areas remaining in the city, and presumably the Nature Conservancy too, in a conundrum. The Nature Conservancy was presumably not thinking of a bridge support when they acquired the island with the intention of making it a nature reserve within a bustling city. What they were, and are, thinking about is how to manage the island as a nature reserve, in partnership with other agencies with conservation and recreation mandates. The normal course of action in these situations is to come up with a management plan, through consultation with partners in conservation, stakeholders, and the public, that would spell out the actions, access and facilities for Kettle Island that would best protect the features that make Kettle Island special. Plans and designs for both the bridge and the island nature reserve need to be developed together.

A glance at the map of the proposed Kettle Island bridge on the National Capital Commission web site shows some wiggle-room within this option. If the Nature Conservancy's management plan recommends leaving the island as it is, would it not be possible to build a bridge that arches over Kettle Island, or nudge it a bit upstream, so it misses the island completely? This would at least avoid road salt falling on the vegetation, and lessen disturbance to nesting birds and other wildlife. The distance of the span would be about 1500 metres. The Golden Gate Bridges span is more than twice as long; the single longest span of the Sydney Harbour Bridge would neatly fit over the entire river at Kettle Island, as would the Bosphorus Bridge. If the National Capital Commission is serious about its commitment to minimize environmental impacts, if long-term benefits rather than short-term cost savings are indeed the deciding factor, and if the island location was simply coincidental and the island was in fact not selected because it made a convenient bridge support, then adjustments of this nature should be possible.

The question now seems to be: Can we have a bridge at Kettle Island, and a nature reserve too? Do we have to say good-bye to the undeveloped shoreline, as continually shifting alluvial islands by their very nature do not make good “bridge supports”? Do we have to say good-bye to the efforts of Ottawa Riverkeeper to clean up decades of accumulated garbage on the island? Do we have to say good-bye to the good intentions of Bowater, who donated most of the land with the intention of doing something good for the environment and the good efforts of the Nature Conservancy to protect our natural heritage? Do we have to say good-bye to the peace and quiet and beauty? Will this bridge leave a legacy of impaired ecosystems and recreational opportunities for a city defined by these very elements as much as it is by Parliament Hill.

No matter what decision is made on mitigating the environmental impacts of the bridge, or even if the NCC goes back to the drawing board and re-evaluates the options, there is still the issue of beauty, and the impacts of a bridge on the beauty of the river. Take a stroll on a summer evening in Britannia where the bike path skims the shore of the river and join in with much of the community - moms, dads, kids and dogs - for the summer evening ritual of watching the sun, a flaming red ball, set into the river. A similar ritual occurs at Westboro beach, where the setting sun silhouettes paddlers on the water. . When people in Ottawa seek beauty, they go to the river.

Bridges can be structures of great beauty that shape skylines, influence the development of culture, and define a place. Like any built structure, they make a statement of values. Think of how the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco defines that city, or the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, or the gracefully arching Sydney Harbour Bridge that is an instantly recognizable symbol not only of a city, but of a continent.

But in recent years bridges have become merely utilitarian extensions of highways, with high concrete rails to hide the view of the waters being crossed. Will the new bridge spanning the Ottawa River, whether at Kettle Island or another location, be a structure that adds an element of beauty to the cityscape and the riverscape? Will it be a defining element of the National Capital Region, augmenting, rather than detracting from the natural beauty of island, river, and shores it spans? Can you see it now, a graceful curving span over-arching Kettle Island, ‘gliding’ over the lush green forests and the sparkling blue waters below?

If we want our bridge, and our nature preserve, on Kettle Island , we need to push for a solution that does both, and one that defines Ottawa as a city where beauty and the natural environment rank as high a priority as traffic flow.

Everyone will have a chance to express their views on the Kettle Island location at the next public meetings, September 23 at Maison du Citoyen in Gatineau and September 24, at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa. Visit <http://ncrcrossings.ca> for more information.

Background Guff: For the past two years, the National Capital Commission (NCC) has undertaken an Environmental Assessment (EA) Study identifying potential interprovincial traffic links between Ottawa and Gatineau, and identifying the preferred options. The primary objective of this project, one component of a long-term transportation plan, is to relocate truck traffic from downtown Ottawa to reduce the current community disruption in Lowertown, and to improve the efficiency of moving goods and people in the National Capital Region. Note that the new bridge will not eliminate truck traffic from the MacDonald Cartier Bridge. It should reduce it, but there will still be lots of trucks crossing there.

The goal of the first phase of the study is to recommend a preferred location for the new link. With the announcement by the National Capital Commission of Kettle Island as the preferred alternative, this first phase is nearly completed. The second phase of the study will refine the selected alternative (s).

Max Finkelstein is a paddler, author, environmentalist and raconteur. When he is not speaking about, writing about, or otherwise promoting Canada's river heritage, Max can usually be found paddling on a river.