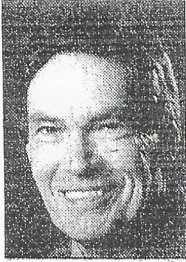


# New defence plan for Ottawa River is a keeper



**BOB PHILLIPS**  
*The Outaouais*

**P**ublic policy in the 20th century was marked by mankind's pressure for globalization. It was not always called that, but increasingly attempts were made to transfer responsibilities for governing to higher levels, whether leagues of united nations or fusions of villages into mega-cities.

People on both sides of the Ottawa River caught the wave in the new City of Ottawa and in the almost-created no-name city of the Outaouais. Whatever the merits of these fusions, few still believe that saving money will be one of them. The new cities are designed "to compete better in the global market place," just like international corporations.

If the cities work as their designers hope, mainly they will reduce the inefficiencies of a multitude of local authorities that sometimes compete, but almost always delay positive action.

Now emerging is a new and different approach to globalization, if we may misuse that term, to monitor the health of the Ottawa River, particularly the Ottawa and Outaouais section of it. The proliferation of local authorities in two provinces with a toe in the Ottawa's waters is mind boggling, and vital cross-river (inter-

provincial) consultation is commonly deficient. One might dismiss the whole effort for concerted programs, except that the private citizens behind it are nationally respected, experienced and down to earth.

The Ottawa is eastern Canada's second largest river, 1,271 kilometres long. It was once the artery of the whole regional economy, and optimists now plot its renaissance through tourism. Meanwhile, though the log drives have stopped, sewage still pours into it. Rapids have been dammed or bridged. The shoreline has been reshaped. Non-native plants and animals threaten its flora and fauna. Preserving a threatened natural wonder for human enjoyment needs concerted action that countless government agencies are not providing.

The approach proposed is the appointment of a full-time "RiverKEEPER," a program that was started by Robert Kennedy Jr. on the Hudson River in New York State in 1983 and was more recently picked up on the Petitcodiac River in New Brunswick.

The "keeper" is a full-time, privately funded, non-government ombudsperson who serves as the public advocate for the whole or part of a river. This person encourages knowledge of, and compliance with, environmental laws; responds to citizen complaints; identifies problems affecting the river; and proposes remedies. Solutions might come through existing government agencies or as new programs sponsored by a non-government organization.

In short, the ombudsperson neither displaces nor duplicates government action, but identifies effective paths through bureaucracy and supports complementary voluntary activities.

It is an interesting, unthreatening and cautious approach. Some government financial support for start-up would be helpful, but its policies would be formed independently of government agencies and commercial interests. It seems to provide better hope than anything else proposed to gain the confidence of sometimes competing agencies and to respect tender provincial sensitivities.

The sponsors of the idea propose to focus on the 150 kilometres of river from the upper Outaouais, at Chats Falls near Arnprior, downstream to the Carillon dam, east of Hawkesbury. After recent meetings, initiators Dan Brunton, a well-known Ottawa naturalist, and former Ottawa councillor George Brown hope to launch an organization later this year.

The attraction of this approach is especially evident in the Outaouais. No major river here has anything like the government and public bodies overseeing the Rideau Waterway (the canal and its encompassing lakes and rivers). Our most active voluntary group, Friends of the Gatineau River, has experienced dismayed frustration in dealing with mutually inconsistent municipalities, an apparently indifferent provincial government, and corporations with their own agendas. An ombudsperson's office could make all the difference, both through its moral force and through its experienced advice on what next to do, where, with whom.

The first step is the Ottawa River. "RiverKEEPER" seems a simple and imaginative idea, far more promising than globalization or urban fusion to save the life of an ailing waterway. The nascent organization deserves our attention now and soon, perhaps, our active support.

Is there a better way to save this heritage that we do not own, but rent from our children?

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