

RiverKEEPERS: watching out for the Ottawa

Saturday, 28 April 2001

2:00 - 3:30 PM,

**Lakeside Gardens Community Centre,
Britannia Park, Ottawa**

A glance at a satellite image will immediately illustrate the Ottawa Valley's most important and dominant natural feature ... the Ottawa River. This, the second largest river in eastern Canada, forms the natural 'heart' of western Quebec and eastern Ontario ¹. It is the route along which plants and animals migrated to recolonize vast regions of the country following the end of the continental glaciation. These in turn were followed by humans, first aboriginal Canadians then Europeans in pursuit of furs then timber, then land. Champlain, LaVerendrye, Fraser, Mackenzie, Franklin, Thompson ... they and thousands of anonymous natives, *coureurs de bois*, loggers and Old World settlers have travelled and lived along this original TransCanada Highway.

The river dominates the layout of our landscape as it has dominated the manner of our use of the land. Despite all this, the Ottawa River has been sadly treated by the very benefactors of its natural wealth. All but one of its great rapids has been dammed and/ or bridged. Vast sections of shoreline have been flooded or reshaped. Partially treated and as well as untreated sewage and storm water pours into the river from towns all along its length. Water quality has declined so far that it is now hazardous to swim in, let alone drink, river water in many sections. The number and quantity of non-native aquatic plants and animals continue to increase at the expense of native flora and fauna. Bit by bit we're losing this vitally important natural wonder.

The Problem

There is no single, ecosystem-based entity concerned first and foremost with the protection of the Ottawa River's natural integrity.

Discussions of the need for better ecological protection of this important but imperiled natural (and national) treasure have been undertaken at various times over the last two decades. Consideration of a nomination of all or part of the river as a National Heritage Waterway, for example, has been recently contemplated. What has stymied even largely symbolic actions such as these, however, is the complexity of jurisdictions involved in virtually *all* decisions affecting the river. All in all, our national government, two provincial governments, and literally *dozens* of municipalities affect aspects of the river's management and ecological integrity ... to say nothing of the even larger number of federal and provincial agencies, municipal authorities and private

¹ The Ottawa River is 1271 km long and has a 140,000 km² watershed.

interests which each play a role.

Is the jurisdictional situation just too complex for any one body to deal with ? Or perhaps, have we been too limited in our consideration of conservation and protection options ?

A possible solution

Reviewing Ottawa River protection legislation (or the lack of it) in the course of studies with the Law Department of the University of Ottawa, George Brown recently concluded that the 'RiverKEEPERS' program being undertaken in over 60 river systems in the United States and along the Petitcodiac River New Brunswick, might present an effective option here ².

The KEEPER concept started on the Hudson River in New York state where a coalition of commercial and recreational fishermen mobilized in 1966 to reclaim the Hudson from its polluters. They constructed a boat to patrol the river and used the winnings from anti-pollution lawsuits to hire the first full-time RiverKEEPER in 1983. This Riverkeeper is hired to work in the public interest as an ombudsperson, someone who would be the eyes and ears of the public on the river.

More specifically, a KEEPER is a *full-time, privately funded, non-governmental ombudsperson* whose special responsibility is to be the public advocate for a water body. Each KEEPER program reflects the needs of the water body and community it represents. At minimum, it is the KEEPER's job to advocate compliance with environmental laws, respond to citizen complaints, identify, with the community's assistance, any problems which affect the water body, and then devise appropriate remedies. A KEEPER's client are *all* users of the ecosystem which she or he represents. KEEPER programs must have a non-profit organization behind them, either an existing group, or one started specifically for the KEEPER program. The KEEPER, in other words, is **a community voice for the river** ³.

A meeting was held 29 November 2000 in the offices of the Geography and Environmental Studies Department at Carleton University to explore these ideas. The group consisted of George Brown, Joe Courtney, Nicole Desroches, Nancy Doubleday and Dan Brunton. Major conclusions of the discussion included:

- the RiverKEEPER model appears to have merit as a ecosystem-based protection model for the Ottawa River;
- any such program must involve participation from *both* Outaouais and Ottawa communities;

² George Brown's paper and other good information on Ottawa River conservation can be read on the Westboro Community Association's home page at www.westborobeach.org/Keeper.html.

³ The *Water Keeper Alliance* is headquartered in southern New York state. Its home page is <http://www.keeper.org>.

- although political support could be useful and welcomed, particularly in regards to start-up support, the program must be *independent* of formal involvement by political agencies or offices;
- the program would not replace the function of any existing conservation organizations or initiatives;
- the entire Ottawa River system represents too large an area to undertake at this time; the ± 150 km section downstream from the western limit of the Ottawa-Outaouais area (i.e. between the Chats Falls and the Carillon dams) represents a more manageable portion.

The next step

At the fall 2000 'brainstorming' meeting and from subsequent discussions it was evident that strong support for the RiverKEEPER idea existed in eastern Ontario/ western Quebec. The positive and supportive treatment on this initiative in Bob Phillip's *The Outaouais* column which appeared as the lead item on the *Ottawa Citizen's* City Editorial page for 5 April 2001, is a good example (see the Westboro Community Association webpage for this text also). Accordingly, a meeting of conservation/ protection interests from both Quebec and Ontario sides of the Ottawa River is being called to start the process for the establishment of a RiverKEEPERS program for the Ottawa River. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to have such a program manned and operational by early 2002.

This founding meeting to be held at **2:00 PM, Saturday, 28 April 2001 at Lakeside Gardens Community Centre**, Britannia Park, Ottawa, will include:

- a review of the conservation situation along the Ottawa River and the protection options available;
- presentation of a CPAC video of the recent RiverKEEPERS presentation by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Water Keepers Alliance president [to be confirmed];
- free-ranging discussion of possible organizational approaches;
- selection of a founding Board of Directors.

The River KEEPER approach has enabled private citizens to encourage ecosystem-based protection in river systems in many parts of North America by 1) ensuring that existing regulatory and scientific tools are applied, and 2) identifying and promoting enhanced protection where needed. It could well prove to be a practical vehicle for ensuring more ecologically responsible management of Ottawa River natural values and resources too, be they within sight of the Parliament Buildings, on the rocky shores of Morris Island or amongst the back bays of the Plaisance marshes. It's a grand vision for a grand river.