

Chapter 3

A Vision for the Waterway

What is the Trent-Severn Waterway, Really?

Waterway, watershed, corridor, canal. Understanding the essence of what we were studying was one of the most important challenges we faced in considering our report. We came to this project with different perceptions. Our conversations with Canadians radically expanded our horizons.

Some Panel members thought the waterway was about boats and locks – a navigable passage from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay. We all recognized that it had historic significance extending back over thousands of years beginning with Canada's Aboriginal Peoples. We knew it was a place for recreation and tourism. We sensed its importance to communities and we knew that its existence had been expressed in rich cultural traditions. Some of us recognized the value of its dams for hydropower.

Through our public consultations, we came to realize that the waterway is something different to each person, largely defined by their relationship to it. We learned that it is an essential source of drinking water, and an ecological network of natural systems including many species at risk. It is a physical expression of our past and an inspiration for our art, music and literature. It is, above all, a part of the daily lives of millions of Canadians.

Clearly the waterway can be defined in many different ways. It became essential to us to develop our own understanding of the waterway, in order to provide a context for our recommendations.

We see the waterway as two large watersheds in Ontario that, over the course of nearly two centuries, have been materially altered through the construction of dams and other engineering works to support the economic endeavours and enjoyment of Canadians.

As such, the waterway is really a vast water management system with a navigation channel running through it. To consider the lakes and rivers of the navigation channel as separate from the rest of the system is neither ecologically tenable nor advisable in planning for the future of the waterway. History reinforces that the waterway and its watersheds have been inextricably linked since humans first began to use and manipulate their waters.

This relationship continues today. Residents throughout the Trent-Severn watersheds – whether in Buckhorn, Minden, Port Severn or elsewhere – face common issues and opportunities that bind them together.

Tomorrow will be no different. We believe that the future of the Trent-Severn Waterway is all about the water and the management of these two large watersheds for the benefit of future generations of Canadians. The remainder of our report reflects that perspective.

Why is the Waterway Important to Canada and Ontario?

Early in our public meetings, we heard a few individuals with homes, businesses or cottages along the waterway comment that they don't think the waterway is important to them. In most cases, these were individuals who perceived the waterway as a system of locks. Because they didn't use the locks themselves or cater to those who do, they felt the waterway provided them with no benefits.

The reality is that you can't just "shut the waterway down." Water will continue to flow, as it has for millennia. It will continue to flow through a huge water management system that, in fuelling settlement and the growth of industry, communities, recreation, and tourism, has redefined the geography and economy of its watersheds.

Continued management of this system is vital to the life of central Ontario. It is essential to a natural environment that has adjusted to this artificial reality. It is essential to public safety, and to the evolving economies and lives of hundreds of thousands of watershed residents and millions more that visit every year.

This waterway system is the pillar of its watersheds' economies. Waterfront residential property alone is worth a whopping \$23.6 billion. Seasonal and permanent waterfront residents generate more than \$1 billion in economic activity and \$240 million in municipal property taxes each year. The waterway alone supports a \$300 million recreational fishery, Ontario's largest. And water-based tourism generates tens of millions more dollars.

Boats and locks are perhaps the most visible parts of this great system, but they are only the "tip of the iceberg".

The lakes and rivers controlled by this system will be increasingly important to future Ontarians. They will provide a source of water. They will be cherished for their recreational amenity by residents of the burgeoning Greater Golden Horseshoe, one of North America's fastest growing regions, and for the economic opportunity they present for watershed communities. They will be valued as Ontario's largest recreational fishery and for their green energy. They will continue to influence the cultural expression of central Ontario. And ecologically unique and diverse habitats located within the waterway region such as "The Land Between"⁴ will constitute irreplaceable and unique treasures of provincial importance.

We believe the waterway and its watersheds will also be of increasing importance to Canadians. The waterway is Parks Canada's largest National Historic Site and one of its most popular. It is within a two-hours' drive of our nation's largest city and millions of new Canadians. Its legacy of thousands of years of continuous human occupation along its waters is of national and international importance. It has produced artists, writers, and musicians of national and international repute. Its development influenced the political fortunes of Canada's early prime ministers and helped open a young country to settlement. It remains a highly visible expression of federal presence in Ontario.

Many of the waterway's technologies are unique in international terms. Building on one of the earliest large-scale watershed manipulations, the system today is the largest federally owned and operated water management system in Canada. Continued federal management can contribute to efforts to improve the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem and embody the federal commitment to the health of a nationally precious resource – water.

A Vision for the Future

Our vision for the future of the waterway is a reflection of what we were told by hundreds of people – First Nations, watershed residents, governments, and industry.

⁴ "The Land Between" – contact zone between the Canadian Shield and Lake Ontario Lowland that features a high degree of ecological diversity.

First and foremost, we see a future that “is all about the water” and is focused on the watersheds of the Trent-Severn.

We see the water as a living and evolving expression of who we have been, who we are, and who we will be in the future.

We see a future that commits to preserving the quality of the water.

We see a future that is rooted in the equitable sharing of the water throughout the watersheds within the context of a strong conservation ethic, one subscribed to by all users.

We see a future where governments and citizens work effectively and together to assure the watershed’s sustainability.

We see a future that provides for the enjoyment of the water by all our citizens and builds our communities around the water.

What Needs to be Done

In the remainder of this report, we make 26 recommendations that we believe need to be implemented to achieve this vision. These recommendations can be grouped under six broad areas of action.

We need to **improve the performance of governments** by:

- Simplifying and clarifying roles so everyone knows who is and should be responsible;
- Providing tools that encourage governments to work together and with the citizens they serve; and,
- Improving federal legislation and policies.

We need to **assure the future of our water** by:

- Improving the role and performance of the federal government;
- Paying particular attention to development near the water;
- Enhancing our understanding of the state of the watershed environment; and,
- Reinventing how we value and manage water throughout the watersheds.

We need to **plan for future places to live and enjoy along the waterway** by:

- Enhancing regional identity;
- Preparing for the demands of a growing population seeking the amenity of water;
- Encouraging communities to make their waterfronts great public assets;
- Developing green energy potential without degrading natural and cultural values; and,
- Leading and coordinating the activities of communities.

We need to **protect, present and enjoy our cultural heritage** by:

- Broadening our understanding of our water-related heritage;
- Telling Canadians the stories of this heritage and protecting the assets that help tell them;
- Protecting related cultural and scenic resources; and,
- Responding to the needs of those that use the lock stations for enjoyment.

We need to **improve the condition of waterway infrastructure** by:

- Providing appropriate funding;
- Enhancing engineering and maintenance capacity;
- Implementing a balanced asset management program that focuses on continued operation and protection of historic assets; and,
- Renovating facilities to respond to current and future needs.

We need to **provide sustainable funding** by:

- Increasing federal appropriations in support of the waterway; and,
- Increasing revenue from users and beneficiaries.