



Panel on the Future of the Trent-Severn Waterway Commission sur l'avenir de la voie navigable Trent-Severn

DISCUSSION PAPER #3 **RECREATION**

These discussion papers do not represent the conclusions or positions of the Panel. They are intended to stimulate discussion of some of the broad issues facing the waterway.

Context

The natural attributes of the Trent-Severn Waterway and the fact that 50 million people reside within a one-day drive make the waterway a highly valued recreational amenity. It has been described as having “the biggest concentration of high capability recreational land and water in Ontario”.¹ The waterway is the first navigable chain of recreational lakes and rivers north and east of Toronto. As such, it is unlike other regional-scale open spaces such as the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine. The waterway offers great recreational value to a rapidly expanding and ethnically-diverse Greater Toronto Area (GTA), all within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH).

The waterway's 45 lock stations, two lift locks, and one marine railway offer unique recreational experiences. Land visitors can picnic, fish, or just watch the boats. The managed water levels in the waterway's interconnected lakes and rivers offer boating, fishing, and swimming. Beyond the locks activities such as hiking and cycling can be enjoyed. Many people benefit – day visitors from the GTA, tourists enjoying waterfront camping and resorts, seasonal and permanent waterfront residents on more than 132,000 properties along the waterway (not including Lake Couchiching), and hundreds of thousands of people living in the waterway's urban and rural communities.²

Current Situation

Lock Station Use

The traditional perception of recreational use of the waterway revolves around boating. While boating on the waterway appears to be increasing, lockages have declined over the last 20 years. There are three times as many land visits to lock stations as there are boaters locking through. Upwards of 60% of boaters and land visitors to lock stations are from Central Ontario, and the most popular lock stations for both boaters *and* land visitors are Bobcaygeon, Big Chute, and Fenelon Falls.³

¹ CORTS, *The Rideau-Trent-Severn – Yesterday Today Tomorrow*, 1973, p. 9.

² East and Chamberlain, 2004, cited in Parks Canada, *State of Environmental Health*, 2005, p. 13, vol. 1 of *Indicators of Environmental Health and Long-Term Monitoring Strategy, Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site*; Lake Simcoe Environmental Management Strategy, *State of the Lake Simcoe Watershed*, 2003, p. 3.14.

³ Parks Canada, *Ontario Attendance Report 1998-2005*, 2006, pp. 35-38.

The growth in lockages up to 1985 generally parallels the level of seasonal residential development along the waterway. Lock use peaked in 1988 at 260,000 but has steadily declined since. The 132,600 lockages recorded in 2006 represent a drop of 17% from 2005 (and only 52% of the 1988 peak) to a level not experienced since 1967.

The vessel use chart on the left below shows boat lockages from 1955 to 2005.

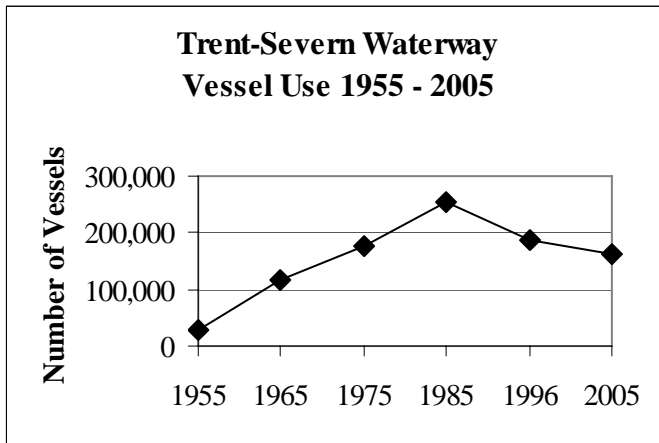


Fig. 2 Source: Parks Canada, cited in *State of Environmental Health*, 2005, p. 145.

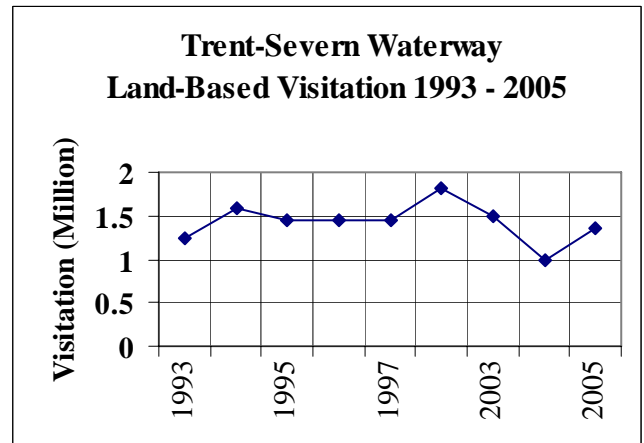


Fig.1 Source: Parks Canada, cited in *State of Environmental Health*, 2005, p. 144.

The land-based visitor chart on the right above shows that land-based visitation was generally steady at 1.5 million from 1998-2001, increased to 1.81 million in 2002, but has declined since (the 2004 decline reflects that year's labour dispute). Up to one in five land-based visitors are from the GTA, and its ethno-cultural communities in particular are visiting lock stations for day use picnicking and fishing. The following key trends/information characterize lock station use.

Land Visitors

- In 2005, seven locks accounted for 70% of land visits. Four locks (Big Chute, Fenelon Falls, Bobcaygeon, Peterborough) accounted for fully 55% of this figure.⁴
- Most have visited a particular lock before, are in groups of two or more, and spend ½ to 2 hours there.
- In 2005, watching boats and showing friends and relatives the locks accounted for 61% of the prime reason for visiting.
- The proportion of visitors older than 55 is rising (20% in 1996 to 36% in 2005), whereas those with children are declining in percentage terms (41% in 2005).⁵

⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

⁵ Parks Canada, *Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site: Land-Based Visitor Survey*, Cornwall, 1996, p. 3 & Parks Canada, *Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site: Land-Based Visitor Survey*, Cornwall, 2005, pp. 1-4.

Boaters' Lock Use

- Lock use in the Kawarthas (Burleigh Falls to Rosedale) and along the Severn River is twice the system average; from Lake Ontario to Peterborough this drops to one-third.
- In 2002, 20% were day-users; 21% spent 4-6 days; and 30% spent 7-14 days on the waterway.⁶
- In 1997, 69% of boats were 10m or less; 18% 10m or longer; 8% were houseboats.⁷

Between Lock Stations

There is little information concerning recreational use of lands and waters between lock stations. However, there is no doubt that there is substantial recreational activity along the waterway.

By some estimates, there may be more than 40,000 boats located at residences and cottages along the 4,800 km of shoreline. This does not include boats owned by resorts and campgrounds, or transient boaters that use the waterway for day use or vacations.⁸

In 2004, Parks Canada estimated 400 commercial marinas and resorts derived revenue from water-based activities along the waterway. Of these, 76 had Parks Canada occupancy licenses (excluding Simcoe and Couchiching, where Ontario issues licenses). The Ontario Marine Operators' Association has 75 member marinas along the waterway, most (41) in the Kawarthas, followed by Simcoe (23).

Recreational fishing contributes \$5 billion to the Ontario economy every year.⁹ The waterway provides a wide range of angling opportunities. In 2000, an estimated 130,000 anglers fished on Lake Simcoe alone,¹⁰ with most of this activity involving ice fishing in from 2,000 to 4,000 ice huts.¹¹

Camping is another popular recreational activity on the waterway. Six provincial parks feature almost 1,900 sites, and 4,852 more are available at private, municipal, or First Nation-run campgrounds and seasonal trailer parks.

Almost all communities have local waterfront parks – some in association with locks. A number of rail trails parallel or intersect the waterway, for example, within Peterborough, between Peterborough and Lakefield, and the Trans-Canada Trail.

Other privately-operated recreational resources include 75 cottage rentals and high-end resorts. Several golf courses abut the waterway – one on Rice Lake near Keene even has dock access.

⁶ Parks Canada, *Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site: Boater Survey*, 2005, p. 2.

⁷ Parks Canada, *Trent-Severn Waterway Economic Impact Study: Boater Survey*, 1997, p.2.

⁸ The number of cottages along Lake Simcoe was estimated in 1995 to number 12,000. Lake Couchiching is not included.

⁹ Fisheries and Oceans Canada, *2000 Survey of Recreational Fishing in Canada*, 2000. Retrieved from http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/communic/statistics/recreational/canada/2000/index_e.htm

¹⁰ Department of Fisheries and Oceans, cited in LSEMS, *State of Lake Simcoe*, 2003, p.3.13

¹¹ LSEMS, op. cit., p. 3.13.

The Challenges

1. Providing Outdoor Recreation Opportunities to a Growing and Diverse Population

The increased recreational demand fueled by expected growth of the GGH from 7.9 million in 2006 to 11.6 million in 2031 combined with a declining amount of available waterfront land will place growing pressure on public recreation lands. Undeveloped public and even private lands are also experiencing the pressure with resulting conflict and law enforcement issues. Diminishing public investment in public recreational lands by both the provincial and federal government is compounding the challenges of accommodating current and future demand.

The effects of GTA growth have long been felt along the waterway, but are increasing. Parks Canada staff operating the locks have observed changes in visitor demographics and recreational demand for the waterway.

- Increased use by Toronto-area ethno-cultural land-based visitors, particularly Asian families and extended families for all-day use (e.g., picnicking, fishing)
- A growing interest in group travel for day use of lock stations
- Increased shore-based recreational fishing, including a fishery element
- More conflicts between fishers, boaters, and picnickers. Lock station services and facilities (e.g., parking, washrooms, space) are not oriented to land-based uses such as shore-based fishing. Conflicts are sometimes compounded by language barriers.

2. The loss of future opportunity from the development of the shoreline

One factor behind the 1970s Canada-Ontario Rideau-Trent-Severn studies (CORTS) was the inadequate amount of publicly accessible shoreline for water-based recreation. In fact, a 1973 CORTS report stated the “recreational environment of the Rideau-Trent-Severn Corridor is approaching a state of crisis”.¹² This is a continuing concern.

A 1978 CORTS report concluded that there was a “deficiency” in public recreational shoreland in the Kawarthas, and “a serious land deficiency” for swimming, fishing, and boating around Lake Simcoe.¹³ Another 1973 CORTS report recommended public shoreline ownership around Lake Simcoe be increased from 5% to 15%.¹⁴

Some land along the waterway was initially acquired as a result of the CORTS program to enhance public access to the water. No organized, continuing program evolved nor was any of the acquired land developed for recreational use. As a result, lock stations and other parklands are shouldering increased public demand for water access. More recent land protection efforts have focused on the natural environment, through limited land securement, bequests, or more stringent government protection such as federal and provincial wetland policies. While the nature of recreational demand is changing, recreational lands have remained low on the agenda since the CORTS studies.

¹² CORTS, *The Rideau-Trent-Severn – Yesterday Today Tomorrow*, 1973, p. 9.

¹³ CORTS, *Public Recreation Land Review*, Framework Report No. 9, 1978, p. 14.

¹⁴ CORTS, *The Simcoe Couchiching Area – Yesterday Today Tomorrow*, 1973, p. 25.

Recreational and land demand along the waterway continues to grow. The population of municipalities touching the waterway grew by 30 percent from 1986 to 1996.¹⁵ Between 1968 and 1994, the number of buildings within two kilometres of the waterway increased by 130 percent in the Kawartha Lakes, and by 232 percent on Pigeon Lake alone.¹⁶ Development now includes the backshore as waterfront sites are used up. Conversion of seasonal cottages to year round residences is also a significant trend. The conversion of waterway marinas to waterfront residential use may signal new evidence of this trend.

3. The accommodation of outdoor recreation in large scale land use planning

In the 1970s and early 1980's, Canada and Ontario agreed to enhance the waterway as a critical future recreational resource, particularly in the Toronto-Centred Region. The CORTS studies proposed a range of recreational facilities along the waterway – extended stay and day use areas such as campgrounds and beaches, access points to water, scenic roads and boat/canoe routes, and regional trail networks, among others. The 1982 federal/ provincial CORTS agreement included the following policy: “The governments, with the co-operation of the municipalities and the private sector, will develop a co-ordinated recreational system within the corridor.” The private sector was viewed as the prime provider. Subsequently, attention to those goals was superseded by attention by other priorities. As a result, there is concern over the adequacy of public access to the waterway to meet both current and future demand.

More recently, Ontario has introduced regional-scale initiatives such as the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, the Greenbelt and the “Places to Grow” planning framework. The planning goals associated with those initiatives do not, however, address the challenge of providing outdoor recreational opportunities, particularly water-based opportunities to a growing population. In fact, there is some concern that the Greenbelt initiative might accelerate development pressure in the waterway corridor by restricting development to the south – the leapfrog effect.

5. Declining lockages

Over the last 20 years, the locks have served an increasingly smaller proportion of the waterway's boaters. A recent survey of waterway lockmasters suggest several factors could contribute to this decline: rising gas prices, lock fees, operating hours, inclement weather, changing demographics, two income families, and others. Lockmasters have also observed a trend towards larger boats using the locks for lockage and mooring.

Recreational boating industry research in the United States suggests that:

- While the number of boats as a percentage of the population is not increasing, the number of boats per household is;
- Those that own boats are spending more time using them;
- Most boats are less than 26 ft long, with the most common being 16 ft or smaller;
- Personal watercraft use is expanding rapidly but still in the minority.
- More than 80 percent of recreational boaters also fish.¹⁷

¹⁵ Parks Canada, *State of the Environment Health*, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁷ Responsive Management, *Factors Related to Recreational Boating Participation in the United States: A Review of the Literature*, Report prepared for National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, Harrisonburg, VA: 2000, pp. iii-iv.

There is much we don't know about boating – even the number of boats – along the waterway. Some have speculated that the growing number of permanent residents along the waterway is a factor in reduced lockages. Another indicator may be the closure of several marinas and their conversion to more viable residential use. Because boats are a primary draw for lock visitors, fewer boats may lead to a decrease in land visitors

Ideas

1. The Government of Ontario and Parks Canada together with implicated municipalities including those from the GTA should review the outdoor recreation conclusions and strategies advanced by the CORTS process. A possible outcome of such a review would be a regional strategy for open space provision along the waterway, including the identification of areas and sites with potential to serve future demand. By working together, governments can better understand and accommodate current and future recreational demand and use of the waterway corridor.
2. Municipalities, in official and other planning activities, might consider the role they play in accommodating outdoor recreational demand growth both from within their own jurisdictions and from the GTA. The reality is that “they will come” whether it is built or not. Good planning offers the potential to avoid degradation of existing recreational supply, reduce conflict among users and generate day travel tourism benefits for local economies.
3. One possible outcome of the preceding ideas is that land-based visitation might become an increasingly important part of the formal mandate for lock stations.
4. Parks Canada and the marine industries should try to better understand the decline in lock use and consider steps to reverse them. Ideas that have been brought up in the past or used elsewhere include the removal of lock fees (e.g., New York State's Erie Canal), heavier promotion, and a focus on community economic revitalization. The huge continuing investments in lock operations make this an important priority.